

# Harry Potter and the Trelawney Prophecy

## Chapter One

### Sorrow's Solace

A small fuzzy object hit Harry Potter in the side of the head, waking him up. Harry sat up and looked around. The object was whizzing around his bedroom, hooting excitedly.

"Pig," muttered Harry. "Be quiet."

As soon as Ron's (Harry's best friend) owl got close, he simply reached out and snatched the tiny owl from the air. An easy feat due to Harry's Quidditch training.

Pig nipped at Harry's fingers as he dropped a small parcel onto Harry's bed. Harry let go of him and watched as he flew to Hedwig's perch for a drink. Hedwig (Harry's own owl) wasn't there.

Harry glanced at his alarm clock. 12:10 am. He sighed until he realized it was 12:10 on July 31. It was his birthday. No wonder Ron had sent Pig. They lived next door to each other now, but it had become tradition that his friends from school sent him birthday wishes just after midnight.

Since Harry had been having an emotionally draining summer, he allowed himself to smile as he picked up Ron's note.

*Harry,*

*Happy Birthday. This is just a note, we have the presents from my family here for you. You can come over you know. I know Sirius says you're still depressed but we miss you. I miss you. Quidditch in the clearing is dull without you.*

*Talk to me, Harry. I used to be damned good at being your best friend. Now I'm not so sure.*

*Ron*

Harry swallowed the additional guilt like an oversized pill. He had been avoiding the Weasleys and Ron for the passed few weeks. He'd been experiencing so much guilt and confusion that he had felt better just wallowing in his own misery.

Harry got another note and some fudge from Hagrid as well as a note from Hermione. He got nothing from Ginger. He didn't expect anything from her but it still hurt. She was so angry with him because he wouldn't tell her what was wrong. Harry couldn't.

Because of Voldemort's lies, Harry was a hero again. Voldemort and many of his Death Eaters were locked up awaiting execution. It was because of Voldemort's lies that Harry's emotions were in such turmoil again.

Voldemort had told the aurors that Harry had tricked him. That Harry had tricked Voldemort into helping Harry over the power threshold until the aurors made it there (using the maps that Harry had made) to capture them. Harry had gotten a couple of awards. He couldn't remember the ceremonies.

He *did* remember going to Voldemort at the end of the last semester though, and *that* is what was tormenting Harry. Voldemort and Harry had been feeding magic off each other, every time Voldemort touched Harry and especially when Voldemort touched Harry's scar. In Harry's case, being young, he reached thresholds - a platform of power that he needed extra power from Voldemort to get him through it. The first, at the end of his 5th year, Harry had gotten so dizzy he felt as if he was sliding into oblivion. The 2nd, just before the summer, is what was causing Harry such grief lately.

After the second threshold Harry had endured 4 days of dizziness and messed up vision, then the pain had hit. Madam Pomfrey had done all she could, including keeping Harry in dreamless sleep, but Harry had known that only Voldemort could help him.

Harry needed an extra dose of Voldemort's power to get him over the threshold.

Harry had been through torture and pain to the extreme but this had been enough to push him to the limit of his endurance. Sirius had

finally told him to go to Voldemort and Harry had. Sirius had told Harry that Ron had found the Maps that Harry had made.

Harry remembered begging Voldemort to help him. Telling him that Harry accepted him. Voldemort had asked if Harry knew what he was saying. Harry, passed the realm of his tolerance for pain and knowing that Voldemort was the only one who could help him, had sworn that he did. He begged Voldemort to help him and *Harry had called Voldemort father.*

"You all heard him," was all Voldemort had said to his Death Eaters.

That is what haunted Harry. He couldn't understand why Voldemort had told the aurors that Harry had tricked him. Couldn't understand why Harry was a hero again. Voldemort could tell when Harry was in pain. Voldemort had to know that Harry wasn't in any condition to try to manipulate him.

Harry couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even Sirius or Ron.

He had to talk to Voldemort first. Voldemort had filed a stay of execution again so that Harry had to talk to him before the execution but Harry was afraid to do that too.

Harry had spent half of the summer in such fear with such guilt, he felt crippled. Sirius wasn't pressuring him, seemed afraid to and his friends seemed to be reading Harry's aloofness.

Only Ginny and Rowan seemed to be the most vocal. Ginny had told him if he didn't tell her what was wrong then he shouldn't talk to her at all. So that being the case, Harry had lost her. Rowan's tears weren't working to cleanse Harry of his guilt and inner pain and thusly she was very irritated. Rowan, being Harry's phoenix, kept trying.

Harry put his birthday notes on his nightstand then Hedwig flew in. She landed on Harry's bed before him and waited while Harry took off the note on her leg. She looked up at him with a sad expression. Harry guessed Hedwig could tell Harry was having a bad summer too.

When he looked down at the parchment, Harry understood. It was from Voldemort.

*Happy Birthday, Harry. I am sure you have grown much and I know I have taught you well, but I know you still have questions and are still curious. I know you are confused. Come to me, Harry. We have much to discuss.*

Because of the guilt and confusion forced upon him by Voldemort, Harry had been living a damned nightmare this summer. He'd alienated his friends and Sirius and spent most of his time alone.

Two weeks after his birthday, Harry fell asleep slumped over his summer homework at his desk in the office.

Images of his past flashed through his head.

*The boy will come to me.*

*Our connection grows ever stronger.*

*My Death Eaters have accepted it, even if you haven't.*

*I am as a part of you as you are a part of me.*

*The only wizard in the world who I can't kill and can destroy me is Harry Potter, and he is now my son.*

Sirius woke him gently.

"Harry?" said Sirius.

Harry looked up. He was sweating and his eyes were burning.

Harry rubbed his hands over his face.

"All right, Harry?" said Sirius.

"No," said Harry. "I have to see Voldemort."

Sirius looked hard into his face.

Harry returned the level stare. "I do, Sirius," said Harry. "I have to see him."

"Harry-"

"You know I'm right," Harry insisted. "Please Sirius."

"All right, Harry," said Sirius, but he didn't look happy.

Harry left Sirius at the last gate and continued up the corridor toward Voldemort's cell. His stomach had started to hurt two gates ago. Now he was broaching on full blown nausea. He walked stiffly passed several cells with Death Eaters in them. They whispered, "Master Harry."

Harry ignored them and kept his eyes on the floor. He wasn't sure what he was going to say but he knew he needed to know why Voldemort had done what he had.

The burn slowly increased on his head as he walked. Finally, Harry flinched as he looked into Voldemort's cell. Just like the last time, Voldemort was reclined in a cozy chair eyes closed, looking perfectly at peace.

Harry didn't step away from the bars. He didn't want to be overheard. He was sure this conversation was going to be very strange, very frustrating or very painful.

He felt emotionally drained all ready and he hadn't said a word. Harry stared at the floor trying to think of something to say.

The pain in his head doubled and Harry looked up. Voldemort was standing before him, holding a hand under his chin.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry opened his mouth but Voldemort touched his face to keep him quiet.

"Listen to me, Harry," said Voldemort. "I know you have questions. I will answer them, but not here."

"What-" started Harry but a guard raced up the corridor at him. Somewhere in the distance, Harry heard Sirius calling his name.

"Harry," said the guard, approaching at top speed. "We have to get out of here. The Dementors are coming."

"The Dementors?" said Harry, confused.

The guard stopped dead, staring over Harry's head. Harry turned around.

Five Dementors loomed over him. Cold enveloped him. He forgot everything Remus had taught him as he heard his mother's screams inside his head.

Harry backed away from them. "No," he whispered. The screams got louder. Harry blacked out.

Harry woke up in his bed in his tent in Voldemort's compound.

*What have I done?*

An all encompassing guilt hit Harry, recalling his mother's screams.

"Harry."

"Go away, Voldemort," said Harry.

"Harry, eat some chocolate," said Voldemort. "There is some next to your bed."

"No."

"Harry, you haven't betrayed them."

That got Harry's attention. He turned his head. "How do you figure that?" said Harry.

"Choices," said Voldemort.

Harry sat up. Voldemort was across the room sitting in the chair he usually used when he was with Harry in this room.

"I don't understand," said Harry.

"Eat some chocolate and I will explain," said Voldemort.

Harry picked up a piece and took a small bite. Warmth spread over him.

"How much do you remember, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"Enough," said Harry.

"I'm surprised you remember any of it," said Voldemort. "In the condition you were in, I'm surprised you were able to come to me without assistance."

"Is that why you told the aurors what you did? Because you thought I wouldn't remember?"

"No, Harry. I told them that because you did not accept me."

"But I remember-"

"Harry," Voldemort interrupted. "Choices. You didn't choose to accept me. You *had* to."

"You knew I was the only one who could help you. You knew what I wanted to hear. You were suffering to the limit of your endurance. You simply couldn't take anymore and you didn't think I would help you without a concession from you."

Harry stared at him. It was true, but Harry had still said it, sworn it.

"Remember what you told me? *For Sirius I will do as he says. For you I will do what I have to do.* In your mind, you did what you *had* to do to end your suffering."

"I still said it, Voldemort," said Harry hoarsely. This was the conversation he was dreading - and it was turning out to be painful.

"But I will not accept it," said Voldemort.

Harry blinked at him.

"You did not choose to join me, Harry," said Voldemort. "And I will not have it any other way. When you finally do accept me, choose to stand with me, we will both know it."

"How?" said Harry curiously.

"The connection will be complete. I will feel your power, and you will feel mine."

Harry was too confused to comment so he took a bite of chocolate.

"So I made you a hero again," said Voldemort. "So the wizarding world would know they haven't lost you yet."

"And what will they think now?" said Harry. "The day I visit you, you escape."

Voldemort waved his hand. "I have taken care of that. The guard who rushed in saw the Dementor subdue you and he heard me order Lucius to bring you so I could punish you for deceiving me."

"Always one step ahead," muttered Harry.

"I have to be, Harry," said Voldemort. "Have some more chocolate and rest, Harry. We will talk again later."

Harry watched Voldemort leave feeling better than he had all summer.

It hadn't been a free will decision. It was the pain that forced Harry to say what he had. Voldemort knew it. Harry laid back in his bed and actually slept.

Harry emerged from the tent. The camp was quiet but he heard voices from the conference tent. Harry moved toward it. According to Voldemort, he was allowed in now but he wasn't sure he wanted to.

"...not too long."

Harry heard. It sounded like Sirius. Harry dismissed it, blaming hunger. He hadn't slept or eaten properly in weeks. He moved to get some food and sat down before the fire to eat.



He had almost finished his plate when he felt the burn.

"Good morning, Harry," said Voldemort. "I saw the flinch. I know I didn't sneak up on you."

Harry shrugged, laid his plate on the table beside his chair and leaned back into the chair in a comfortable slouch.

Harry looked at him across the fire, unsure what to say.

Voldemort studied him. "Harry?"

"What?" said Harry cautiously.

"Do you know how they found us?"

Harry sighed. "I do."

"Tell me," said Voldemort.

Harry leaned forward on his legs. "Do you remember last year, the celebration you had when you broke open Azkaban?"

"Yes."

"I was bored. I found a map of the camp and although the layout was correct, it wasn't finished."

"You don't mean that wasted effort of Wormtail's to create a map like the Marauder's Map, do you?" said Voldemort.

"Yes," said Harry. "It gave me something to do while the celebration went on - to distract me from the pain."

"You got it to work?" said Voldemort.

"Partially," said Harry. "The pain got too annoying and I called Rowan. Then Severus came in. I didn't get it to work fully until the day you took Ginger."

"I'm impressed, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Well, I couldn't get it to disappear," said Harry. "But I was able to identify all the dots."

"There had to be something else," said Voldemort.

Harry couldn't help grinning. "That first time you saw me in my animagus form, I had been flying over the camp. I noted landmarks and sketched another map."

Voldemort grinned back at him. "Very clever, Harry. I'll have to remember that. Harry Potter bored and resourceful is a very real danger to me."

Harry couldn't help his grin from becoming a smile. "I don't suppose you could tell me how to get to Bulgaria?"

"I could," said Voldemort. "But I won't."

Harry watched as Voldemort got up and rounded the fire to stand before Harry. Harry flinched.

"Why not?" said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry." Then his expression went very serious. "Stay with me, Harry."

"I-"

Voldemort cut him off. "Visit for a few days."

Harry eyed him suspiciously. "Why?" said Harry.

"You know I enjoy having you here with me," said Voldemort. "And I'd like to see how your powers have grown after the threshold and over the summer."

"More tests?" said Harry with horror as he stood up. "I don't think so."

Voldemort searched his face. Voldemort was close enough to grab him and force him to stay if he wanted to but Harry was betting he wouldn't.

"You know I can make you," said Voldemort.

Harry was right. "I don't think you will," said Harry.

Voldemort reached a hand towards Harry's face. Harry leaned away. Voldemort gripped Harry's wrist instead to keep him from moving away and from apparating. "No, Harry," said Voldemort. "I won't. But I want you to remember that it is an option."

"Threatening me with torture is a great way to make me want to stay and visit with you, Voldemort," said Harry sarcastically.

Voldemort chuckled and touched Harry's face. The combined touch put Harry to his knees.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. He released Harry's wrist but kept his hand on Harry's face. Harry couldn't move. His gaze was held by Voldemort's red stare. "But you need to know I still have that advantage over you."

Like Harry would forget.

"But I am hoping your curiosity may influence you."

"Oh?" Harry managed to say.

"Yes. I have tests," said Voldemort. "Aren't you curious to see what I have to teach you?"

*All my tests teach you something.*

Voldemort had a point. He took his hands away from Harry's face and Harry leaned on one hand, pressing the other to his scar. He looked up at Voldemort.

"What do you say, Harry?" said Voldemort. "I went to Azkaban for you again. I didn't have to let the aurors take me. Give me three days."

Harry pushed himself to his feet considering Voldemort's expression. He appeared hopeful. What did Voldemort want to teach Harry? Damn Harry's curiosity.

"All right, Voldemort," said Harry. "Three days."

## Chapter 2

### Change

Harry was a little disappointed with the first test. It was a written test. Harry stood over his desk, looking down at it.

"Sort of beneath your flair for dramatics, isn't it, Voldemort?" said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled as he settled into a chair.

"You're staying then," said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "You will have questions. I will need to hear them."

Harry leaned over the desk, looking down at the parchment.

"You are allowed to sit down," said Voldemort.

But Harry was still studying the test. It was the strangest collection of questions he had ever seen. Some of the questions were on wizarding history, others on curses but most of them were very personal. Harry glanced at Voldemort. Harry could bet there was some hidden meaning behind them.

"Am I allowed to use the books?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "And that touches upon something else that has me curious."

"What?" said Harry as he summoned a book and it flew to his hand. He finally sat down, flipping through the book.

"Why have you never changed anything about this tent?" said Voldemort.

Harry looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"This has been your tent for a little over two years, Harry," said Voldemort. "You've never changed it."

Harry shrugged looking back at his test. "This is the tent you allow me to use, it isn't mine to change."

"Who taught you that?" said Voldemort, frowning. "The Dursleys?"

Harry was floored. Voldemort was right. Anything he used there had been because his aunt and uncle had allowed it. He never moved anything in that room because nothing was his. That is why Harry's room was never a mess. Everything he held dear was safely locked in his trunk.

"I see I am right," said Voldemort.

Harry looked back down at the test.

"Harry, I know how it feels," said Voldemort. "Everything I ever considered mine, which wasn't much was kept in my trunk. It wasn't until I went to Hogwarts that I found out I had inherited a fortune."

Harry knew how that felt.

"You have a room with Sirius, don't you?" said Voldemort.

"Yes."

"Do you like it? Have you made it your own - changed it?"

Harry looked at him. "Ron helped with it. It suits me," said Harry. "Why should I change it?"

"Because you can," suggested Voldemort. "Because it's yours."

"But I don't want to," said Harry, getting frustrated. "What's the point of changing something that already works?"

"Change can be good, Harry," said Voldemort. "It can inspire. Being able to adjust to change is a valuable attribute."

"Well then I guess I lost out on that one," said Harry.

"Oh, no, Harry. You didn't," said Voldemort. "You have adapted to everything life has thrown at you. Your problem isn't adapting to change, it's initiating change."

Harry wasn't sure where this was going. "Meaning?"

"You changed the world when you were only a year old," said Voldemort. "True you didn't know it, but since then, you've blindly accepted everything that has been thrust upon you."

Why couldn't he just spit it out.

"Voldemort-"

"Harry," Voldemort interrupted. "You have the power and the opportunity to do great things - initiate extraordinary changes if you chose to."

"Is this another lecture on joining you?" said Harry.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "It's about action. Choosing to act rather than-"

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "I chose to go down the trap door to protect the Sorcerer's Stone. I chose to go down the pipe into the Chamber of Secrets."

"Even then you were coming to me," said Voldemort said with grin.

Harry ignored it. "And I chose to follow the grim passed the Walloping Willow instead of getting help."

"The grim?"

"Oh," said Harry. "Professor Trelawney saw the grim in my tea leaves during our first Divination class. I had already seen a big black dog the night I had run away from the Dursleys. I kept seeing that dog all over the grounds, I didn't know it was Sirius keeping an eye on me and trying to figure out how to get his hands on Pettigrew."

Voldemort nodded.

"So you see," said Harry. "I have initiated changes."

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Small ones."

"I save Pettigrew's life," said Harry. "You call that small? Because of that one small change my fourth year was a nightmare. And it was all your fault."

"Why?" said Voldemort.

"Because you devised that elaborate scheme to get to me," said Harry.

Voldemort nodded. "I left you no choice. And I made sure I had a servant there to make sure you won."

Harry didn't want to think about Cedric. "Moody was one of the best things about that year," said Harry.

"Barty?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I actually liked him. I didn't know why he was helping me but I liked him. He turned Malfoy into a ferret and bounced him around the room."

Voldemort chuckled. "Did he? I wonder how I didn't hear that piece of interesting news."

Harry shrugged. "And he showed me that I could counter the Imperius Curse."

"Yes and he should have mentioned that part to me," said Voldemort. "But my most faithful servant only knew that I needed your blood and that I simply going to kill you. No one was more surprised that I was when our wands connected."

Harry had forgotten all about the test. He had to admit, his conversations with Voldemort were intriguing.

"Voldemort?"

"Yes, Harry?"



"When did you come up with this new elaborate plot to get me to join you?"

"Ah," said Voldemort. "That was shown to me as more of a revelation."

"Tell me," said Harry.

"Ah, that curiosity," said Voldemort.

Harry looked back down at the test. "If you don't want to-"

Voldemort chuckled. "You know all you need to do is ask, Harry," said Voldemort. "We had just set up our first compound and were in conference. I was listening to my Death Eaters - sometimes it's best to just listen, Harry, remember that - and then from one of my more brainless servants-"

"Wormtail?"

"No, Goyle," said Voldemort. "I heard the word connection in context to you and me. I knew immediately that you had to join me. Everything fell into place after that. Of course I knew you would resist, as your father did, but I knew I would win."

"You haven't yet," said Harry.

Voldemort smiled. "I know, Harry. But now we both know you can say the words. The next time you say them, you will mean them."

Harry didn't feel so confident but said, "Don't hold your breath."

Harry completed Voldemort's bazaar test and watched silently as Voldemort looked over it.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "Why did you answer the question Who is the most powerful wizard you know? Harry Potter?"

Harry stared at him. Harry had thought that was a trick question. "Aren't I?" said Harry.

"Why would you think so?" said Voldemort.

"Well because the two most powerful wizards in the world have been fighting over me," said Harry. "And the entire wizarding world keeps focusing on what Harry Potter will do, it seems to me that I may not be the strongest wizard in the world but I have the most power."

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I'm right, aren't I?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "You have accepted it. I am pleased."

Harry frowned at him. "You gave me that entire test just for that question didn't you?"

"Partially," said Voldemort. "Several of my questions were trick questions, which I noticed you answered sarcastically, which I knew you would."

"Why?"

"Because the correct answers would be too personal and I knew you wouldn't want to reveal them," said Voldemort. "But by your answers, I can tell that you understood the question."

Since the test (and their conversation) had taken most of the afternoon, Voldemort left him alone through dinner and that night. Harry was grateful for it because although Voldemort had not gotten close enough to cause Harry any real pain, his presence for that long was still draining.

The second test was using the Imperius Curse on a strong wizard. The first one had been on Ron, which Harry had managed in his 5th year - and without a wand. But Harry didn't know if he had the power to do it on a full grown wizard.

"Can I use my wand?" said Harry, noticing Lucius and Severus approaching them.

"Harry, you have been through two thresholds," said Voldemort. "You will not need it."

"Are you serious?" said Harry.

"Don't you realize how powerful you've become?" said Voldemort.  
"Have my tests not shown you? Harry, do you think another 17 year old boy could do what you can?"

In all honesty, Harry didn't know but Voldemort rarely lied to him. Harry shrugged.

Voldemort chuckled. "Modesty," said Voldemort. "A noble attribute."

"You should try it," said Harry.

Voldemort scoffed at the idea. "Oh, no, Harry. You know I enjoy gloating too much."

Harry laughed - had to. "So this test..."

"Yes," said Voldemort who turned to the other men who had stood there quietly waiting for Voldemort's attention. Severus looked amused. Lucius looked irritated.

"So what do I do?" said Harry.

"You know what to do," said Voldemort. "Except in this instance, you will tell them to do something that I wouldn't want them to do."

Harry blinked at him. Something Voldemort wouldn't want them to do?

Harry stared for a moment at Lucius. His expression had changed to one of apprehension. Lucius considered himself one of Voldemort's most trusted and favored Death Eaters, which Harry believed.

Harry raised his hand.

"Imperio," said Harry.

Lucius' eyes glazed over until a somewhat stupefied look came across his face.

"Renounce your master," Harry told him.

He looked like he was struggling even as he faced Voldemort. There was no expression on Voldemort's face.

"Renounce him," said Harry. "Tell him now."

"I will not do your bidding any longer," said Lucius.

"I will kill you," Voldemort told him simply.

"I defect," said Lucius.

Voldemort raised his wand.

Harry jerked his hand up, breaking the curse. Lucius fell to the ground.

"Voldemort, why-"

"To see if he was faking, Harry," said Voldemort. "He knows I want you to do well. I just wanted to be sure you had done it properly. I knew you would break the curse as soon as I threatened him. He's never been under the curse before. That is why he fell once it was broken."

"How-"

"Because I have never put either of them under it," said Voldemort. "And no other wizard is strong enough to put them under it, which is why I am using them."

"Oh," was all Harry could say.

"Now," said Voldemort. "On to Severus." He turned to Snape. "You know you can't cheat, Severus."

"Do you think I would, My Lord?" said Severus.

Voldemort chuckled. "I doubt it," said Voldemort. "Go on, Harry."

Harry looked at Snape. Snape was looking back with one of his more threatening "I dare you" type expressions. Snape was going to make it hard for him.

Well, Harry guessed, if it was a test, so be it. But what to order him to do?

"Harry," prompted Voldemort.

"Give me a minute," said Harry. Voldemort always had Snape look after Harry. Snape was always the one who patched Harry up. Voldemort trusted Snape with Harry.

Harry raised his hand again. Snape stared hard into eyes.

"Imperio," said Harry.

Snape's gaze glazed over but he still stared at Harry.

"Hit me," said Harry.

Snape didn't move.

"Severus, hit me," said Harry forcefully.

Still, Snape didn't move. His eyes were still locked with Harry's. Then Harry realized what he was doing.

Lily's eyes.

He was fighting because of Harry's mother, not because of Voldemort.

Harry broke eye contact still holding his hand on Snape. "Professor Snape, hit famous Harry Potter," said Harry.

Harry found himself on the ground a second later after Snape's left hook. Snape had also hit his knees after the curse had been broken.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "You figured out what he was doing."

"Yes," said Harry, getting up and rubbing his jaw. "Sorry, Professor," said Harry, offering his hand to help him up.

To Harry's surprise, Snape took his hand. "I couldn't make it easy, could I, Potter?" said Snape.

Harry couldn't help his grin. "No, Professor," said Harry. "I'd be very surprised if you did."

"Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry turned to him. He didn't look as pleased as he was a minute ago.

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Leave us," said Voldemort harshly. Severus and Lucius left.

Harry took a step back. "What have I done?" said Harry.

Voldemort seemed to be struggling with his composure.

Harry took another step back. "Voldemort, what-"

"It's nothing, Harry," said Voldemort.

"You're upset," said Harry.

"Harry-"

"I'm asking," said Harry.

Voldemort sighed. "You know it bothers me that I can't touch you," said Voldemort.

And Harry had just spoke with and helped Severus to his feet. "I-"

Voldemort reached a hand toward Harry's face. Harry stood his ground and felt as Voldemort's knuckles stroked down his cheek.

"Lord Voldemort has discovered with irritation that he is most possessive over his son."

Harry blinked at him.

"Go eat and rest, Harry," said Voldemort. "You have pleased me."

Harry continued to stare as Voldemort walked away. Possessive? Harry didn't like the sound of that.

The next morning Voldemort got angry again as he approached Harry and Severus at the fire. Harry and Snape had been in the middle of a heated debate over one of the Quidditch matches. Harry was trying to insist his point that the Slytherins used highly underhanded tactics when Voldemort had hit the flinch zone.

Harry didn't stop his argument. "Come on, Professor," said Harry. "He grabbed the back of my broom."

Severus had been sitting back looking amused. "It's the nature of the game, Harry," said Severus. "Tell me you would enjoy it as much if it wasn't such a challenge."

Harry stared at him then ran a hand through his hair. "Well, you may have a point," said Harry. "But I still think that Flint was a-"

"Marcus graduated last year," said Severus.

"Yeah but that Cretan Samuels isn't any better."

"Complaining, Harry," said Severus with a somewhat smug grin.

Harry fell back into his chair. "Doesn't do me much good to complain to you does it, Professor," said Harry. "I suppose I'll be getting detention now."

Severus looked like he wanted to laugh but had glanced up. Harry followed his gaze and found Voldemort looking back at with an unpleasant look on his face.

Voldemort's expression instantly relaxed. "I have a small errand to run, Harry," said Voldemort. "But I have one more test."

"What-"

"It's a small test of your powers," said Voldemort. "But it is quite important. I won't be long. Will you wait?"

"Will you beg me?" said Harry.

The question seemed to please Voldemort because he smiled. "I'm asking."

Harry sighed. "All right."

"Very good," said Voldemort and he disappeared.

Lucius approached them as soon as Voldemort left.

"What was that about?" said Lucius.

"I have no idea," said Harry. "Was he mad about something?"

"Oh yes," said Lucius and he looked at Severus. "I don't think he likes seeing you on friendly terms with Harry."

"Friendly terms?" said Harry sarcastically. "He's been trying to get me expelled for years and he made me poison myself two years ago. That's friendly?"

"But that is at school," said Lucius. "For appearances. When you are here it is different. The master doesn't like that you have known Severus for so long. It reminds him that you have an entirely different life at school."

"He can't tell me who I can talk to," said Harry.

"I think what Lucius means," said Severus. "Is that Voldemort can't make you do anything since you found out the last contract was void and his frustration over that affects everything else."

"Too bad," muttered Harry.

"Just be careful what you say to him, Harry," said Severus. "Because Lucius is right and if he gets mad enough, he will more than likely take it out on you."

"Which will only remind me of his cruelties," said Harry. "And strengthen my resolve to stay away from him."



"Maybe," said Lucius. "But-"

"He's back," said Severus, standing up.

Harry stood up and they all turned. Voldemort moved towards them from his tent. There was a strange expression on his face. Harry considered that whatever his intention was, he was determined that it would turn out to his satisfaction.

Harry started to get nervous. Voldemort moved directly to Harry, his gaze intent as he searched his face.

"Are you ready, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"I guess," said Harry.

"Should we leave you now, master?" said Lucius.

"No, Lucius," said Voldemort. "I need you both for this."

"So what is it?" said Harry as the group moved away from the campfire.

"As I have said," said Voldemort. "This is a simple test of your powers simple but it is very important."

"Oh?"

"Yes," said Voldemort. "You have shown that you are strong enough to keep me from apparating with you out of Hogwarts. This test is to see if we can keep you here."

Harry was confused. "But I already showed I can get out of your magical bonds."

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "But physical restraints are stronger."

"I-"

"You will see," said Voldemort. "As you know, Lucius and Severus are my most powerful Death Eaters." Voldemort turned to Lucius. "You know what to do," said Voldemort.

"Yes, my lord," said Lucius and he reached out and gripped Harry by the wrist.

Harry looked down at his hand then at Voldemort. "So what do I do?"

There was little Harry could do to physically make Lucius let go.

"Magically force Lucius to release you," said Voldemort.

Harry tried to disapparate but couldn't with Lucius holding him. Harry understood the test. If the wizard was strong enough and didn't want to leave with the other wizard, then the other was forced to stay. Just as Harry had done with Voldemort.

So how could he force Lucius to let go?

He tried twisting his arm with his release command. I want to go home.

Lucius tightened his grip. "Very good, Master Harry. I felt that."

Harry looked at him then remembered how Wormtail had transfigured to get out of his chains.

Harry transformed. Lucius took a step back startled as Harry flew a circle around them.

"Harry is a animangus?" said Lucius.

"So that's what the big secret is," said Severus.

Voldemort ignored both of them, his eyes on Harry. "Very clever, Harry," said Voldemort. "But that's cheating."

Harry transformed a couple feet away. "Why?" said Harry. "It worked."

"Yes," said Voldemort and he raised a hand. He lowered it right away though and Harry got the impression that he had wanted to touch Harry but had changed his mind. "But how am I supposed to judge your internal magical strength if you use transfiguration."

"Internal magical strength?" said Harry puzzled.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Try again and you will see." He turned to Severus.

Severus gripped Harry's wrist.

Harry tried to think of something internal. But what had Voldemort meant. Harry tried to repel Severus.

"Nice try," said Severus. "Not strong enough."

At least Severus had felt it. But how- Harry looked at Voldemort. Voldemort had wanted to touch Harry but didn't. There was usually no way Harry would touch Voldemort by choice. If it hurt, Severus would let go.

But how could he physically hurt Severus. Internally?

"Tough test, Voldemort," muttered Harry, staring at the ground.

Love? Harry's mother's love had protected him from Voldemort's touch before. He concentrated on that. He thought about the love he felt from Sirius and from his friends and Ginger.

He looked up Severus to see if it was working.

Severus smiled sadly and shook his head.

Lily's eyes.

Severus knew what it was like to love so that wouldn't work with him.

Harry tried the opposite. But he guessed Severus knew something about that too because it didn't work.

Then Harry tried pain. He forced himself to remember the agony he'd been forced to endure. But that simply had no effect. It had to be something that reached his skin.

How's it feel to be burned at the stake, Harry?

Harry closed his eyes and remembered the execution. He recalled his skin burning, his hands blistering. I'm burning.

Severus jumped back with gasp, staring at his hand.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. He turned to Severus. "What happened?"

"He tried several emotions, which weren't strong enough," said Severus who then looked at Harry. "Then it felt like he burned my hand."

"Interesting," said Voldemort who also looked at Harry. "What did you do?"

"I'm not sure," said Harry. "You said it was internal so I was using emotions, memories."

"Very good," said Voldemort. "Go on."

"Well, I have a pretty vivid memory of being burned at the stake."

"Ah, repulsion through memory," said Voldemort. "Impressive. That is very powerful when you find one that works. Both of you now," Voldemort told Lucius and Severus.

They both gripped Harry's wrists. What worked once, Harry tried again. I'm burning. But between the both of them, the command alone wasn't strong enough. Harry focused on the memory, felt his skin burning, saw the blisters.

Lucius and Severus both jumped back at the same time.

Voldemort nodded his approval. "Very good, Harry."

"Yes, I'm impressed," said Lucius, still looking at his hand that although not burned still appeared to be bothering him.

But Harry was looking at Voldemort. He had a pretty good idea what the next test was and was pretty sure he would fail. Voldemort was going to show Harry that he could indeed keep Harry there if he

wanted to, but at the cost of putting Harry in pain. Would Voldemort do that?

Harry should leave before-

Too late. Voldemort grabbed Harry's wrist. Harry stared at the ground, enduring the initial pain. He focused on his memory. I'm burning.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "I can feel you fighting me. How long can you last against me?"

Harry let the memory envelop him. Let it block out everything, even the pain from Voldemort's touch.

The pain was increasing.

Come on, Harry.

Harry switched to his love memories.

Home, Harry, Sirius had said. We're going home.

I love you, Harry. I've loved you since James laid you in my arms and you looked up at me with Lily's eyes.

"That won't work, Harry," said Voldemort softly.

The pain grew again and Harry opened his eyes. Voldemort was reaching out his other hand towards Harry's face.

"No Voldemort," said Harry softly. "That's cheating."

Voldemort hand came closer until Harry sank to his knees.

"I know, Harry," said Voldemort, brushing his knuckles down Harry's cheek. The pain broke through all Harry's thoughts. "But I don't want you to leave me yet. You are here. I will keep you here."

"You won't like it," rasped Harry.

"Perhaps not," said Voldemort.

A cry of pain tore out of Harry as Voldemort's fingers moved close to his scar.

"Just enough to drain you," said Voldemort. "That's all I need."

Voldemort kept staring into Harry's face. Harry hadn't thought he would do it.

When Voldemort was satisfied that Harry was weak enough, he let go. Harry slumped to the ground.

"Rowan," said Harry as strongly as he could, which wasn't much.

"She can't come," said Voldemort.

Harry pushed himself to his hands and knees, staring at the ground. That had been where Voldemort had gone. "You took Rowan?" whispered Harry.

"Yes, Harry. I'm sorry."

Harry doubted that. He felt a grip on both his arms as Lucius and Severus helped him to his feet. He swayed slightly.

Harry looked at Voldemort. "You've proven you can keep me here," said Harry. "But I gave you the last three days. I chose to stay. I spoke with you. I let you test me of my own free will."

"I know, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Now, I'm under no obligation, Voldemort. If you keep me here, you will get nothing from me," said Harry.

Voldemort reached up and held Harry's chin up so he could look into his eyes.

"I look forward to proving you wrong, Harry," said Voldemort.

## Chapter 3

### Helplessness

Harry woke to searing pain. He screamed and rolled off the bed, landing hard on his side and breathing heavy.

"There, you see, Lucius," Harry heard Voldemort's voice. "I told you we would be able to tell when he woke up."

"It's because you're so close, master," said Lucius.

"Oh, I know, Lucius. I know," said Voldemort. "Harry, do you require assistance?"

Harry didn't respond. He just laid there trying to control his shaking. He had rolled off the bed on the wrong side and had landed at Voldemort's feet.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It didn't hurt so Harry guessed it was Lucius.

"Harry?" It was Severus.

"Tell him to move away," rasped Harry.

"What was that, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"Harry asks that you move away, master," said Severus.

"Does he?" said Voldemort. "Then I will hear him ask me."

"Master-"

"If Harry wants anything of me, he knows all he needs to do is ask and I will do it. I will hear him ask."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. Voldemort was going to play this for all it was worth, trying to manipulate Harry to do what he wanted. Harry wouldn't let him.

"Help me up please, Severus," said Harry.

Severus hands came around his arm.

"Let go of him," said Voldemort. "Don't touch him."

Severus let go. "But, master-"

"His requests will go through me."

"But you have given him authority-"

"But he is here because of my will, not by choice or by contract," said Voldemort. "Therefore he will be subjected to my will and my whim."

Harry almost groaned. What the hell had happened? Three days ago, Harry had all the leverage he needed. Had Lucius been right? Was Voldemort annoyed enough, possessive enough, that he would do anything, even keep Harry in pain, to force him to stay?

Harry was so confused his brain started to hurt more. Was this one of Voldemort's more obscure dramatic tests?

With monumental effort, Harry grabbed the bed and pulled himself to his feet.

"Harry, look at me," said Voldemort.

Harry said nothing, nor did he look at him. It took most of his concentration to remain standing.

"I know you are angry, Harry," said Voldemort. "I will let you vent your anger."

Harry would love to but didn't, wouldn't. He wasn't going to say a damn thing to Voldemort. He tried to edge away but Voldemort followed.

"Harry, look at me."

Voldemort reached out and Harry hit the floor again. He kept his eyes down even when Voldemort held his hand under Harry's chin to keep his face up.



"Come on, Harry," said Voldemort. "Show me that green glare of yours."

Harry kept his eyes lowered and said nothing.

"Lucius," said Voldemort. "What do you do when Draco doesn't obey you?"

"I punish him, my lord," said Lucius.

Harry almost looked up. He could argue that Voldemort had already just punished him but then he would have to speak to him, which Harry would *not* do.

"Harry, you don't want me to punish you, do you?" said Voldemort. "It is my right as your father."

Voldemort was getting nasty, pushing Harry's most sensitive buttons. How long could Harry last against the pain and the taunts?

"Master," said Severus.

"Leave us," snapped Voldemort. "I will deal with my son. If I require assistance, I will call."

Harry heard them leave, willing them to come back. He didn't want to be alone with Voldemort. Voldemort let go and moved away. Harry slumped to the ground. There was silence as Harry tried to get a grip on the pain.

There was nothing Harry could do. Voldemort had proven he could and would force Harry to do what he wanted. That trapdoor opened again.

Harry felt the rise of nausea and struggling, rushed into the bathroom. Thankfully Voldemort didn't follow. Harry had gotten sick many times because of Voldemort but Voldemort never knew it. How would he take it?

Drained, Harry sank to the floor near the door. The wall felt cool and Harry leaned his burning cheek against it. *My life is a nightmare.*

But Harry was too weak to apparate.

"Harry?" The voice was Severus' so Harry let out his breath.

Severus pushed open the door that Harry hadn't locked and looked over Harry on the floor.

Severus helped him up. "Come on, Potter. You should be fighting him," said Severus. "This isn't what he expected."

"You mean I've surprised him," said Harry as Severus helped him back to bed.

Severus was thoughtful for a moment. "You did, Harry," said Severus. "So I guess you *are* fighting him."

Harry allowed himself to smile as he lowered his head to the pillow. Voldemort expected Harry's anger, his temper. Instead, Harry stubbornly had remained silent and had gotten physically ill. What would Voldemort make of Harry's misery, knowing he was the one inflicting it?

Harry woke up again in pain but it wasn't the normal pain from Voldemort. It was his eyes. They were burning so severely that Harry couldn't see.

*Stupid!* He'd forgotten to change his lenses. Harry threw his legs over the side of the bed and stood up only to hit his knees. Pulling himself up, using his dresser, he staggered to the bathroom. Once there, he took out his lens and rinsed out his eyes.

He stared at his blurry reflection, leaning close to the mirror. His eyes were blood shot.

He moved carefully back to the bedroom. Leaning on the surface of the dresser, picked up a bottle, holding it close to his face to see what it was. It took several times before Harry found the bottle he needed.

Placing several drops into his eyes, Harry turned back to the mirror, blinking to absorb the fluid. His bedroom was a blur behind him.

When the pain from his eyes diminished, Harry found only a minimal amount of pain. Although Harry was still weak, he considered he might be strong enough to apparate.

If Voldemort didn't come in.

Harry opened the top drawer of his dresser and rummaged through it for a package of lens. Not being able to see well, Harry gave up, held his hand over the drawer and summoned them.

Harry wet them and put them in. Looking back into the mirror, Harry's vision cleared and his bedroom came into focus. Immediately, Harry's attention was drawn to the red eyes staring back at him in the reflection of the mirror.

Voldemort was sitting in his usual chair.

"Do you still like wearing those lenses, Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry just stared at him.

Voldemort stood up and Harry turned around to face him.

"I know you are almost strong enough to leave me, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry crossed the room to stand before Voldemort just outside the flinch zone.

"Will you stop me?" said Harry.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Why?"

"Your stubbornness and tenacity astound me," said Voldemort. "The strength of your conviction is impressive."

"Flattery won't get you what you want either, Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort forced a smile and moved away. Harry was glad of it because he had been standing there defiantly enduring the pain almost daring Voldemort to touch him.

Voldemort turned back to him. "I have one question for you before I let you leave me?"

"Release Rowan," said Harry. "And if I can answer it, I will."

Voldemort gestured with his hand. Within a moment, Rowan soared in and landed on Harry's arm singing and crying at the same time.

"What's the question?" said Harry.

"Why did you get sick?" said Voldemort.

Harry considered the question. "I'm not sure I can explain it."

"Try."

Harry thought on all the times he'd been violently ill because of Voldemort.

"Helplessness," said Harry. "Feeling that there is nothing I can do."

"Ah," said Voldemort.

"It's worse when I know it's my fault." Harry stared at the floor. Rowan was still crying on his shoulder.

"But I have told you before, Harry," said Voldemort. "You have the power and the opportunity to initiate change. Everything that happens to you, you have the power to change. You need not feel helpless again."

Harry looked up at Voldemort. "This was a test, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Do you think I enjoy seeing you in agony?"

"Don't you?" said Harry.

"I don't," said Voldemort. "I have told you that it distresses me that I can not touch my son without him feeling pain. The last 24 hours were very stressful for me."

Harry wasn't sure if he bought that.

"So what have you learned?" said Voldemort.

"That you're as stubborn as I am," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Oh, indeed, Harry," said Voldemort, stepping up to him. He reached out and touched Harry's face. Because of Rowan, Harry didn't feel any pain. Voldemort smiled. "You know I won't give up."

"Then we are both doomed, Voldemort," said Harry. "Because I won't join you."

"A cynic and now a pessimist, my Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry sighed.

"Harry, my test showed that your internal strength can block out the pain," said Voldemort.

It was true but... "So," said Harry.

"You were able to fight me until I used two hands."

"Why did you do that then?" said Harry.

"That was the measurement, Harry," said Voldemort. "To see how much endurance your internal strength has."

"So you really didn't do it just to keep me here?"

"No. I admit it distresses me that I must devise ways to get you to visit with me," said Voldemort. "But I know a time will come when you will stay with me and you will call me father."

Harry shook his head. "You ask too much," said Harry.

"You have grown into an extraordinary wizard," said Voldemort. "I know you don't see it - can't conceive it, but you will and when you do, you will make me *and* your parents very proud."

Harry stared into the red eyes. Voldemort still held Harry face and seemed pleased that he could because of Rowan.

"Fate has a funny way of revealing itself," said Voldemort. "It even surprises me sometimes."

Now Harry really had a headache. "I'm leaving your exalted presence now," said Harry softly.

"One last test," said Voldemort. He moved his hand from Harry's face to his wrist. "You have Rowan. Let's try this again."

Harry let his memories envelope him and within minutes found himself back in the living room of La Casa Black. Voldemort was with him. Thankfully, the room was empty.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. Harry looked with surprise. "But do you realize what this means?"

Harry was afraid to ask but curiosity got the better of him. "What?"

"The last time I touched you, I gave you more power. I couldn't keep you there but you brought me with you," said Voldemort. "Our powers are equaling out. I could take you back with me now."

Harry didn't like *that*.

"I propose we make a little deal," said Voldemort.

"What kind of deal," said Harry.

"A simple one," said Voldemort. "You promise to come and visit me every so often - at your discretion - and I won't come and steal any of your friends or you from the castle."

"Or Rowan," said Harry.

"Very well."

"But the Ministry-"

"Need never know," said Voldemort. "Surely you can slip away for a few hours every once in while."

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"But you can try," said Voldemort.

"All right, Voldemort," said Harry. "I'll try."

Voldemort reached out his hand and Harry shook it. Then Voldemort took hold of Harry's face again, staring into Harry's eyes.

"I'm very pleased," said Voldemort. "That last boost of power has made you strong enough. And you are almost ready, Harry."

Harry stared defiantly back. "Nothing you could do-"

"Oh it won't be me," said Voldemort. "The Ministry will do it."

"The Ministry?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "They will force you to make your choice." Voldemort smiled. "It's almost our time, Harry. And you will be ready."

Harry was sure he didn't want to ask this time. He took a step away from Voldemort and Voldemort left the house.

Harry stared into the flames of the fireplace, stroking Rowan absently. He couldn't say what he was feeling. He wasn't submerged in guilt and depression anymore but he certainly wasn't feeling optimistic.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up as Sirius entered the room. Sirius studied him cautiously.

"When did you get back?"

"A few minutes ago," said Harry.

Sirius walked slowly toward him. "Are you all right?" said Sirius.

Harry stared into the concerned face of his godfather. "I don't know, Sirius," said Harry. "I really don't know."

Sirius frowned. "He's still at it, is he?"

Harry looked back into the flames. "Yeah," said Harry. "I just wish he didn't sound so confident." He looked back up at Sirius. "Sirius, do you think I'm as powerful as Voldemort says?"

Sirius rested a hand on Harry shoulder. "Yes, Harry," said Sirius. "You are that powerful. And everyone knows it. In fact, the Ministry wants to see you now that you're back."

Harry sighed. "Am I in trouble again?"

Sirius forced a smile. "No, but they want assurance that you still haven't joined him."



## Chapter 4

### The Ministry of Magic

Harry stood before the board, self-consciously staring at the floor.

"The guard at Azkaban," said the Minister, Mr. Goodhue, "testified that you passed out because of the dementors and Lord Voldemort ordered you taken to punish you."

Just as Voldemort had planned. "Yes, sir," said Harry.

"And did he?"

Harry nodded.

"For four days?" The Minister sounded skeptical.

Harry looked up at him. They still doubted him. "He threatened to force me to stay unless I let him test me," said Harry.

"How could he force you?" said Mr. Goodhue. "Albus Dumbledore assures us now that you are strong enough to-"

"Mr. Goodhue," Harry interrupted. "All he has to do is touch me. If he holds on for long enough I don't even have the strength to stand up, let alone apparate."

"So what happened?"

"He tested my powers," said Harry. "Then he demonstrated that he could still keep me with him." Harry could see the next question on the Minister's face. "By torturing me and caging my phoenix so she couldn't help me. Tell me," Harry looked around at all those assembled, "any of you, would you seek an alliance with a wizard who constantly reminds you that he can put you in agony on a whim."

"Many have joined him out of fear of torture, Harry," said Goodhue.

"But I don't fear torture, Minister," said Harry. "I've taken it and have endured it. Voldemort knows that. He wants more than my alliance."

He wants what I can't give him. And unless I give it to him by choice, he can't control me or my powers."

"Harry-"

"Steve," said Dumbledore, standing up. Everyone turned to him. "We've all heard Harry's testimony. He will be at Hogwarts with me in two weeks. You have my assurance that he will be well protected at the castle."

"Yes, Albus, we know that but-"

Albus Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Harry," said Dumbledore. "These tests, what did they reveal."

Harry swallowed hard. "Well, Voldemort said that I'm almost as strong as he is now."

Dumbledore nodded gravely as a buzz went around the room.

"He says," said Harry nervously with a glance at Dumbledore.

"Go on, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "Well he says that the Ministry is afraid of what he can give me. Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Yes, Harry," said Dumbledore. "But you're not ready."

Harry almost screamed, but let the matter drop. He knew he could get nothing from Dumbledore unless Dumbledore wanted to tell him.

Sirius took Harry to Diagon Alley the next week for his supplies but Harry couldn't help feeling that Voldemort was right. They seemed to have him under heavy surveillance. There was a fully trained witch or wizard watching him at all times. As if the Ministry was trying to keep him away from Voldemort out of fear that Harry would learn too much. But of what?

It seemed that everyone was trying to manipulate him as much as Voldemort usually did. The Ministry would lock him up (Harry

wondered if they could hold him as powerful as everyone seemed to think he was) if they had an inkling that Harry was going to turn.

He needed to talk to someone. Harry guessed it was about time to patch things up with Ron. Try, at least, to explain what had been eating him up all summer.

"Where are you going, Harry?" Sirius called from the study.

"I'm just going over to Ron's," said Harry, turning back to face his Godfather from the front door. "I assume it's safe enough to go over to the Weasley's."

Sirius flinched at Harry's bitter tone. "I know this is hard on you," said Sirius.

"I know, I know," muttered Harry. "You're just protecting me."

Sirius sighed. "Bloody difficult job, if you ask me."

*Great - more guilt.* "Sirius-"

"Never mind," said Sirius. "Just go talk to Ron. It'll make you both feel better."

But not five minutes later as the front door to the Burrow opened, it was slammed in his face.

"Ginger," called Harry through the door. "Come on, open the door."

Harry pounded on the door and it was soon flung open again. Harry was almost knocked down as Mrs. Weasley grabbed him into a fierce hug.

"Oh, Harry," cried Mrs. Weasley. "It's so good to see you. Are you alright?"

"Let him go, Moll," Harry heard Mr. Weasley from inside the house. "He can't breathe."

Since Harry couldn't, he was grateful for the interruption. Mr. Weasley's hand fell onto his shoulder. "Alright, Harry?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I'm fine. I'd - I - is Ron around?"

Mr. Weasley turned toward the stairs but the sound of pounding feet were all ready approaching.

"Mum, Ginny said-" Ron cut himself off, stopping dead at the bottom of the stairs, staring at Harry.

"I can just imagine what Ginny said," muttered Harry.

Seeing Harry's grin, Ron sighed with relief. "Something about a stubborn idiot who keeps forgetting that he isn't alone anymore."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, well her accuracy is astonishing."

Ron grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him away from his parents.

"Stay in the yard," called Mrs. Weasley.

"We will, Mum," Ron called back, dragging Harry into the garden where they fell into seats at one of the tables.

"Harry, where the hell have you been?" said Ron seriously.

Harry could tell Ron wasn't talking about geography.

"I got lost in hell," said Harry then told Ron exactly what had been torturing him.

Ron listened silently until the very end.

"How could you think you could consciously accept Voldemort?" said Ron.

"I said it, Ron," said Harry.

"Yes, but any fool could have told you that it was the pain," argued Ron. "I saw you remember. I've seen you in all kinds of pain, but that was, well - it was-"

"I know," said Harry. "But it doesn't matter now. Voldemort didn't buy it either."

Harry told Ron about Voldemort's tests and Ron displayed his usual awe of Harry's growing power.

"So he can take you with him now?" said Ron. "And you can't stop him."

"Yes, but-" Harry stopped himself. He almost told Ron about the deal they made but Harry figured it was safer if Ron didn't know. "But I can too," Harry said instead. "I can simply come right back."

Ron nodded and Harry told him about his irritation with the Ministry of Magic.

"Yeah, my dad said that they were going to do that," said Ron. "He told them that it wasn't necessary, but Goodhue is really nervous since the trial."

"Voldemort said it was going to be the Ministry itself that forces me to finally make this choice that everyone is so worried about," said Harry.

"Do you believe him?" said Ron.

"Yes, Ron," said Harry. "I'm afraid I do believe him."

"Well, just remember, Harry," said Ron, serious again. "I'm with you. No matter what. Tell me you'll remember that."

"I will, Ron," said Harry. "And thanks."

Harry got up and looked at his watch. "I should get back before Sirius gets even more worried than he is," said Harry. "And I still have to pack."

Ron got up too. "Me to," grumbled Ron. "It's going to be strange being 7th years - top of the school and all."

"Yeah," was all Harry said to that.

"See you on the train tomorrow," said Ron.

Harry nodded and walked the short distance back to La Casa Black.

The trip to King's Cross should have been enjoyable because Sirius let him drive but Harry could tell they were being followed. The train ride wasn't any better. Although he, Ron and Hermione had found a compartment to themselves (Ginger had taken one look at him and stormed away), Harry knew he was still being watched.

Hermione had reacted almost identically to Ron when Harry told her what had been bothering him. She berated him severely and told him in no uncertain terms that he was being an idiot. She also begged Harry to explain it all to Ginny so she wouldn't have to listen to Ginny muttering about fools and threatening to rip out Harry's hair if he didn't do something soon.

All in all, it was a nerve wracking ride to Hogwarts.

It wasn't until Harry sat down at the opening feast that he felt he could relax. The first years were sorted and the food spread out before them.

Harry dug in only half listening to Ron detail a trip they had taken to visit Charlie in Romania at the end of the summer.

He felt a tug on his sleeve and turned around. A first year witch with huge brown eyes and long blond hair stood behind him. She wore a hesitant smile.

"Can I help you?" said Harry.

"My name is Amanda Michaels," she said shyly. "Are you really Harry Potter?"

Harry glanced at Ron, who laughed, then to Hermione who grinned and looked up at the ceiling. He looked back at the girl and simply raised his hand to show her the scar.

That was apparently enough for her because her smile became blossoming. She really was quite adorable.

"My father said he met you once," said Amanda. "He says you're the balance of power."

Harry stood up abruptly. The girl spooked and left. Harry stared after her.

"What did she say, Harry?" said Ron.

Unnerved, Harry stepped over the bench and strode toward the doors, hearing a chorus of his name being called behind him.

He didn't stop until he was staring into the fire in the Common Room. First the ministry and now this. Harry felt like the tug of war had started again. And the ministry WAS trying to force Harry not to go to Voldemort. And Voldemort kept enticing Harry with the promises of knowledge and power.

COULD the ministry hold him? What would they do?

*What a nightmare.*

"Ah, Harry. You remembered to visit."

Harry looked across the fire to Voldemort.

"I can see by that expression that it has started already," said Voldemort with a grin.

"What could they do to me?" said Harry.

Voldemort sighed. "Well there is a number a things they could do. It's more of a question of what they would do."

"Would their jail hold me?"

Voldemort chuckled. "I sincerely doubt it, my boy," said Voldemort.

"They are trying to manipulate me as much as you do," said Harry, his anger growing.

"Of course," said Voldemort. "Although I have stopped manipulating you. They must try to keep you away from me now."

"How do you figure that?" said Harry.

"Well apart from when I took you with me from Azkaban (I needed to answer your questions), you have been coming to me by choice," said Voldemort. "I can not use hostages anymore, they all know I won't hurt them and my Death Eaters are too afraid of you to try anything that might upset you."

That unnerved him enough that he sat down. He ran a hand through his hair feeling frustrated and helpless.

"Unnerving, isn't it, Harry," said Voldemort. "Here with me, you have unlimited authority. Anything you ask me, I will tell you. Anything you wish me to do, I will do. What does the wizarding world offer you?"

They wanted to keep him from joining Voldemort so that when Harry was ready, he could die for them. But something was missing.

Harry looked up as he felt Voldemort hit the flinch zone.

"I know you are still confused, Harry," said Voldemort. "But it will all become clear when you have accepted your destiny."

"Dumbledore always said I could chose another destiny," said Harry.

Voldemort held a piece of parchment out. Harry took it hesitantly. It was a deed. Harry scanned the document noting it had his name on it. Then he noticed the address and that it had a co-owner on it. The co-owner was a Mr. Jack Taylor and the address was in Bulgaria.

Harry laughed - had to. He looked back up at Voldemort. "You bought me a house in Bulgaria?" said Harry.

Voldemort smiled and reached out and touched Harry's face. Harry endured the pain, staring into the red eyes that had become very familiar to him.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "I have done even that for you. I have given you another option."

Voldemort dropped his hand and Harry stood up.



"Thanks," said Harry. "I think."

Voldemort chuckled. "You'd better get back to the castle before you are missed," said Voldemort. "Albus still has your map, doesn't he?"

Harry nodded. Voldemort stepped back.

"Visit again soon, my son," said Voldemort.

Harry said nothing to that but apparated back to the common room where he found it crowded.

Most of the ministry was there as well as Prof. Dumbledore, Ron and Hermione.

"Did you go to him?" demanded the Minister.

"No," Harry lied. "I went to see Sirius."

"We called Sirius," said Goodhue. "He wasn't there."

"I apparated to him," said Harry. "He was out in the car port, working on his bike."

"That is more than likely true," said Dumbledore. "Sirius spends much of his time working on that motorcycle." He chuckled. "Trying to decipher or dismantle the things James did to it."

Harry looked at Dumbledore. Dumbledore smiled at him. Was Dumbledore lying for him?

The minister accepted the excuse and they all left. Harry looked at Dumbledore.

When only Harry, Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore remained Dumbledore turned to Harry.

"I suggest you send an owl immediately to Sirius and inform him what he was doing this evening."

Then he turned and left.

Harry sighed and fell into a seat.

Ron and Hermione converged on him and Harry tried to tell them what Voldemort had said. They were as confused as he was though. Ron latched onto the Bulgaria idea and laughed his head off when Harry showed him the deed.

## Chapter 5

### Wild Magic

Harry seemed to breeze through his classes. Everything was so easy and he was doing most of it without a wand mostly out of habit.

Hermione was a tad annoyed because Harry's marks were as good as hers now (better in Transfiguration) but she kept it to herself.

Harry had made up with Ginger. If you could call it that. When Harry finally cornered her in the library and explained, she had slapped him, hard, across the face then grabbed his face and kissed him with all she was worth. After that, everything was back to normal.

But Harry was becoming very bored with his classes and soon found himself trying to find ways to amuse himself during class, even if it got him into trouble for fooling around in class.

His classmates found his little magical apparitions and transfigurations funny but his teachers didn't. He made a desk walk out of the transfiguration classroom, created a meteor shower in one of Trelawney's astrological demonstrations, transfigured a Moke into a baby dragon in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid was of course thrilled with this but quickly scolded Harry and told him to change it back.

When he transfigured Snape's cauldron into a piggy bank, even the Slytherins couldn't help their laughter.

"Who did that?" said Snape with menace as his eyes moved over the class and stopped on Harry. "As if I need to ask."

"Sorry, Professor," said Harry but he couldn't suppress his grin. "Er, slipped."

Snape quickly pulled Harry up by the collar of his robe, not easy as although still on the slim side, Harry was as tall as Snape now, and pulled him out of the dungeon.

"Tell me you *didn't* slip," said Snape.

"Er, no," said Harry, looking at the floor. "I knew what I was doing."

"Good," said Snape.

Harry looked up. "Why is that good?" said Harry.

Snape looked at him sternly. "Because if word got out that you couldn't control your magic, there'd be hell to pay."

Harry absorbed that information and nodded.

He stopped messing around after that and tried to concentrate on doing the work. Some of the teachers helped by giving him more challenging work. It was about week later that Harry started to notice a change in the students.

Everyone was leery of him, even some of the teachers and the change in the Slytherins was almost frightening. None of them would look him in the eye unless he addressed them (which Harry never had any need or desire to).

Malfoy was the only one who would approach him but even then, he never had anything nasty to say. It was only in public, when they had an audience that Draco would start in on them or send Harry that Malfoy sneer of his. Again Harry started to wonder what the deal was with Draco Malfoy.

Harry hung back after double potions one day and approached Severus Snape's desk.

"What is it, Potter," said Snape in his normal 'school tone,' without looking up from his notes.

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Harry and he lowered his voice. "But what is with everyone? Do you know?"

Snape looked up at him then. "It's like the whole school is afraid of me again, like when the Chamber of Secrets was opened."

Snape looked around to make sure they were alone. "They are afraid, Harry," said Severus. "I'm sure everyone in the school has been warned by their parents not to upset you."

"But why?" said Harry.

"Well partially because of your powers, most of the students have seen it now. If you loose your temper, you could do some serious damage."

"I've learned to control my temper," muttered Harry. "Thanks to Voldemort."

Severus nodded gravely. "Yes, but most of it is because the Ministry doesn't want anything to push you toward him."

"Making everyone afraid of me doesn't help," said Harry. "It makes me feel like an outcast."

"I'm afraid you are, Harry," said Severus. "You've been singled out by Lord Voldemort. No one knows how long you'll hold out against his torture and manipulation."

"But-"

"Even I am astounded by how much you've taken from him."

"You think he'll win?" said Harry hesitantly.

"No, Harry," said Severus. "I think the wizarding world will win."

"Why?"

"Because you're very much like your father," said Severus. "You'll do what you have to do."

"Well that's encouraging," said Harry.

"Always the cynic," said Severus and he actually grinned. "But you know it's true."

Harry nodded.

"And don't forget about that little 'deal' you made with Voldemort," said Severus. "Because it *is* as binding as a contract."

"You know about that?"

"Yes."

"Then Dumbledore knows too," said Harry.

"Yes."

"Who-"

"Dumbledore and I are the only ones aside from you and Voldemort who know," said Severus. "You haven't told anyone else, have you?"

"No," said Harry.

"Very wise," said Severus. "Don't. If the Ministry found out they may try to lock you up."

"Voldemort doesn't think they could hold me," said Harry.

"Probably not," said Severus, "But they might try. Or-" Severus cut himself off.

"Or?" said Harry.

"You should go, Harry," said Severus. "You'll be late for Divination."

"Or?" prompted Harry again. But then it came to him. Manipulation - like Voldemort. "My friends," said Harry.

"Go to class, Potter," said Snape.

"That's it, isn't it?" said Harry.

"Just go."

Harry left feeling strange.

He let Ron on what Snape said about the Ministry during Divination as they tried to see something through the haze of the crystal ball between them. Ron had told him not to worry about it because his father would never let it happen but Harry was still apprehensive.

Trelawney approached, halting their conversation and she gazed mistily down on Harry.

"Any more dreams, my dear?"

Actually Harry hadn't had any very specific dreams about Voldemort in a while. There was one dream that he had had more than once.

It was a dream about the Burrow. All of the Weasley's, Harry and Hermione were all seated around a table. Even Sirius was there. Everyone looked older, which Harry considered odd as he was pretty sure he wasn't going to live to his next birthday. But he sat there watching all the loving teasing and bickering fly around the table. Mrs. Weasley making her complains about all of the boys.

Then Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry.

"And Harry," she said in his dream. "When are you going to let me fix your hair? I'm really very good at settling untidiness."

And in his dream, Harry had ran a hand through it and said, "Aw, Mum, lay off my hair. It will always be this way."

That Harry had called her Mum always stuck in his mind and he thought of that dream often because she was in fact the closest thing to a mother he'd known.

Harry wouldn't tell the class about that. He hadn't even told Ron about it. Dare he make one up. Always worked for them before.

"Actually, yes," said Harry. "I don't know how important it is but I had one."

"Tell us, my dear," said Trelawney. "And I will interpret it for you."

Harry glanced at Ron who shrugged.

After his conversation with Snape, the Chamber of Secrets was the first thing to come to his mind.

"I was in the Chamber of Secrets again," said Harry.

The class muttered around him and Trelawney picked up the crystal ball and peered into it.

"Yes, I see the sign of Slytherin," said Trelawney. "I also see the sign of the lion."

Harry jumped on it. "Well I was holding Godrick Gryffindor's sword."

"Yes," said Trelawney, squinting into the orb. "The skull," she added. "Your deadly enemy is there."

"Well, I didn't see Voldemort in my dream," said Harry.

The class gasped at the name and Harry looked at them with annoyance.

"Oh, stop it," said Harry. "You all know his damned name and you've all seen him."

Trelawney gasped and Harry look back at her.

"Oh, dear," said Trelawney, staring into the glass.

Harry heard Ron cover his snort.

"What?" said Harry.

Trelawney looked back at him. "What else happens in your dream, my dear?"

Harry knew a death omen coming by now. Harry sighed. "All I remember is clutching the hilt of the sword and thinking, *Are you ready to die, Harry?*"

The class gasped and Trelawney nodded gravely.



"I'm sorry, my dear," said Trelawney with a hand over her heart. "The grim."

Ron lost it, laughing hard. The class gasped again. Harry held back his own laughter to look back at Trelawney seriously.

"I'll do what I have to do," said Harry, echoing Severus' words.

Trelawney looked floored for a few minutes as she stared at Harry.

"Your inner eye is improving, my dear," said Trelawney. "As I knew it would and you have accepted it." She placed the foggy globe back on the table before Harry.

As she floated away, she murmured, "You are indeed the Treasure."

She dismissed the class and while the class avoided him, Ron was still laughing.

"Nice show, Harry," said Ron.

Harry shrugged.

"Finally got contact lenses for that inner eye of yours."

Harry couldn't help his laugh.

Ron stopped suddenly and turned to Harry. "You *did* make that up, didn't you?"

"Yes, Ron," said Harry, still grinning. "I made it up."

"Whew," said Ron. "Had me worried for a minute."

"Come on," said Harry. "Let's dump our stuff so we can get to the Halloween feast. I'm starving."

Ron laughed. "Hey, that's my line, Harry," said Ron.

Harry laughed too.

A couple of weeks later, something very strange happened. Harry got sick. It wasn't strange that Harry got a cold but when it started to get worse, strange things started happening around the castle. At first no one attributed the weird happenings around the school to Harry's cold, but soon it became obvious.

The chair Professor Flitwick was standing on broke when Harry sneezed. Neville's cauldron exploded when Harry coughed. And it went on. Professor Sprout's flower pot shrank, a portrait in Transfiguration flew across the room and Hermione's quill snapped.

Ron and Hermione dragged Harry to the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey looked at him with surprise.

"Sneezing?" she said.

Harry shrugged and she gave him a draft of cold medicine.

They returned to the common room and sat down to work on their homework. Ron made a joke about Hermione's quill but Harry couldn't pay attention. His Divination homework was blurring. His eye lids drooped.

Harry saw the Chamber of Secrets around him. A sword grew heavy in one hand. With a wave of the other hand, he lit several torches around the room then touched his scar.

*Voldemort*, he thought.

*Shouldn't take long now. Are you ready to die, Harry?*

Harry woke with a start and looked around.

He *didn't* just dream that. He didn't. It was just his homework and the damn cold.

"Yeah, that's it," muttered Harry as he collected his things. Everyone had obviously gone to bed although someone had thrown a blanket around Harry. Probably Hermione, Harry mused.

Harry made his way up to the dorm feeling tired and weak. His eyes hurt. They were red, he noticed with a glance in the mirror. But Harry had changed his lenses yesterday.

Fever, Harry considered. As strong as Harry was supposed to be as a wizard, he guessed he had no power over the virus that had attacked his body.

Harry didn't bother to change. He fell into his bed and heard Rowan singing as she landed on his chest. The pressure made him cough.

"I know you can't help me, girl," said Harry. "It's all right. I've had the flu before."

Harry woke to screams of his name.

"What?"

The room was a disaster. Curtains torn, his roommates on the floor, pictures fallen.

"What-" Harry tried again but he sneezed and a dresser fell over, the mirror shrieking.

Harry sneezed again and Rowan had to jump off her perch as it fell over.

Ron and Neville helped Harry out of bed and lead him out of the tower.

"You're burning up, Harry," said Ron.

Harry's knees went weak and he started to cough. Both Ron and Neville ducked as sparks flew around the hall.

"What is going on here?"

Severus Snape approached them. Ron and Neville straightened from ducking. Harry was still on his knees.

"Sorry Professor," said Ron. "Harry is sick. His magic is out of control."

"Potter?" said Snape.

Harry looked up and sneezed again. Four portraits fell off the walls around them. Harry felt a hand on his head.

"Yes, he's feverish," said Snape. "Longbottom, go and get Professor Dumbledore and meet us in the hospital. Weasley, help me."

They dragged Harry back to his feet and managed to get him to the Hospital wing. Harry had shoved his hands under his arms to keep his magic from shooting out wildly and he had shocked himself twice.

Albus Dumbledore arrived and once apprised of the situation, held a hand over Harry's head. A calmness came over him and Madam Pomfrey was able to put him into a bed. He drank the draft she gave him and fell instantly to sleep.

He woke up coughing and when Dumbledore, Snape and Madam Pomfrey came back, the ward was a shambles. All the pictures were on the floor, half the beds were over turned, the other half were scattered around Harry who was on the floor in the middle of the wreckage, holding his arm which he was sure was broken from being hit with flying beds.

When they found him, Dumbledore raised his hand again but that calmness didn't fall over Harry again. Harry sneezed and the three adults ducked as several bed pans flew across the room.

"Can't you stop it?" said Snape.

"No," said Dumbledore. "Harry is too strong. I can not subdue him."

"He dangerous," said Snape. "Not only to us but to himself. He's already broken his arm."

Harry sneezed again and a bed came tumbling toward him. Dumbledore stopped it.

"He should go to Voldemort," said Snape.

Madam Pomfrey gasped and Dumbledore sent her out of the room telling her there was nothing she could do for Harry right now.

"No," said Dumbledore. "With his fever he might end up in the middle of the lake." He lowered himself before Harry, who was still on his knees, cradling his arm. "Harry," said Dumbledore. "Call Voldemort."

Harry's vision and his hearing was blurred and muffled.

"What?" rasped Harry, his voice hoarse from coughing.

"Call Voldemort," said Dumbledore.

Harry put his palm to his scar. *Voldemort*.

Harry felt the pain almost immediately.

"What is going on?" demanded Voldemort as he quickly looked around.

"Be easy, Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "We need your help."

"Albus, what has happened here? I heard Harry call me."

"Harry is ill," said Dumbledore. "He can not control his magic."

Harry sneezed and a side table flew across the room.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "Where are you, my boy?"

Beds went flying away from him and Harry looked up as pain grew in his head. He met Voldemort's red gaze.

"I feel terrible," rasped Harry.

Harry closed his eyes as Voldemort's hand reached out and rested against his cheek.

"Mmm, yes," said Voldemort. "You are burning with strong fever."

"Can you help him?" said Snape.

Voldemort stared into Harry's eyes. "The only way I can think of to subdue him," said Voldemort, "is to drain his strength until the malady runs it's course."

"Do it Voldemort," said Harry weakly. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

Voldemort turned to Dumbledore.

"I can not isolate him here," said Dumbledore.

Voldemort turned to Snape. "Heal his arm, Severus," said Voldemort.

Harry sneezed and another bed came at him. Voldemort stopped it before it hit them and took a hold of Harry's chin.

"Be still, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry closed his eyes against the pain while Severus fixed his arm.

"I will need Severus," said Voldemort holding Harry's gaze again. "Harry will need his drafts."

"Very well," said Dumbledore.

Voldemort let go of Harry and straightened. Harry slumped to the floor, feeling weaker than ever.

"Professor Snape," said Harry again in a hoarse rasp. "Bring some Tylenol."

Voldemort chuckled. "Very amusing, Harry."

Dumbledore had grinned as well but Snape looked confused.

"It is a muggle headache remedy, Severus," said Voldemort.

Harry sneezed again and a painting flew across the room, it's occupant shrieking.

"Take him, Voldemort," said Dumbledore.

Harry screamed as Voldemort's arm came around his chest and he pulled Harry to his feet. Snape took his arm.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "You must focus on me."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes.

## Chapter 6

### The Unexpected Visit

Harry woke up coughing. He was on a floor of sorts but it was covered with pillows, some of which were flying around the room. The tent was empty except for those pillows and himself.

Shivering and sweating at the same time, he pulled a blanket closer around him and struggled to remember what had happened in the hospital wing.

Dumbledore had told Voldemort to take him.

It seemed to Harry that whatever was going on, Dumbledore and Voldemort seemed to be in agreement about somethings. Harry's well-being for one and Harry being allowed to see Voldemort (Harry was convinced that Dumbledore had known Harry had gone to him the first day of school and had covered for him).

Harry pushed it out of his mind. His body hurt enough. Between the illness and Voldemort, he was racked with pain now too.

"Oh, good. You're awake."

It was Snape.

"Wish I wasn't," rasped Harry.

"I have your draft," said Severus, kneeling beside him. "It's a bit stronger than the one Pomfrey uses."

He helped Harry sit up and Harry drank it, choking a little on it. Didn't Severus know any potions that tasted good?

"I'm so cold," said Harry, even as he felt sweat on his brow.

Severus magicked another blanket and wrapped it around him.

Harry felt the burn on his head.

"How is he?" said Voldemort.



"Worse," said Severus.

"I have brought help," said Voldemort.

"Harry?"

Harry blinked as a woman leaned over him.

"Mrs. Granger?" said Harry.

"Shhh. Yes, Harry, it's me," said Mrs. Granger. "Just lay still. I may have chosen Dentistry as my specialty but I'm still an M.D. I know what to do."

She checked his heart and his lungs and took his temperature then started detailing a list of medical supplies she needed.

"He needs fluids. He's dehydrated," said Mrs. Granger. "I'll need to set up an I.V. Can you - well - magic it so it won't fly across the room when he sneezes or coughs?"

"I will insure that he is subdued, Mrs. Granger," said Voldemort. "And I will supply anything you require."

"Very well," said Mrs. Granger.

Harry felt her hand on his shoulder. "I'm here, Harry," said Mrs. Granger. "We'll get you through this."

Harry sighed. That's where Hermione gets it. "Thank you, Mrs. Granger," said Harry.

"Rest, Harry," said Mrs. Granger quietly as she gently pushed him back into the pillows.

Harry coughed and a pillow shot across the room.

Harry woke to excruciating pain. He screamed, feeling himself being held down.

"Relax, Harry," said Mrs. Granger.

Harry felt Voldemort's hands on his face as Voldemort drained Harry strength.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Harry heard as he drifted back into unconsciousness.

Harry woke again feeling so weak he couldn't move. He felt the constant burn and with an effort, turned his head. Voldemort was across the room in a comfy arm chair, eyes closed.

"Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort didn't open his eyes but Harry's voice was so soft and hoarse, Harry didn't know if he heard him.

"I'm here, Harry," said Voldemort without opening his eyes.

"What time is it?"

"It does not matter, Harry," said Voldemort. "You need me. I am here."

"I think my fever broke," said Harry.

Voldemort opened his eyes and looked at Harry. "How do you feel?"

"Just weak," said Harry.

"You still look and sound terrible," said Voldemort.

Harry snorted. "Thanks."

"You still need to rest," said Voldemort.

"Well since I don't think I can move," said Harry. "I don't have much choice."

Voldemort chuckled. "I see you do feel better. Your cynicism has returned."

"Beats beds flying at me."

"Yes," said Voldemort seriously. "You were very dangerous. It was wise of Albus to have you call me."

"He told you to take me."

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "He could not help you. He knows I alone have the power to subdue you."

Harry sighed. "At least it wasn't my temper."

Voldemort chuckled. "No. I have taught you to control that."

"I know," said Harry. "But everyone is afraid of me. I expect it'll be worse now. I feel like a freak."

"Harry," said Voldemort patiently. "You are the most powerful boy in the world. Of course you are feared, but you are also revered."

"I don't feel revered," said Harry.

"Because of your modesty, you don't see it but you will. You will see their fear and their awe."

"I'm too tired," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Oh don't spoil my gloating, Harry."

Harry laughed then groaned.

"Harry, my boy, when I look at you, what you've become, I see the world at our feet," said Voldemort.

Harry looked over at him. "Really?" said Harry sarcastically. "And here I am feeling lucky that I can even see my feet."

"Always the cynic, my Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry sighed, feeling tired again.

"I will take you back to Albus tomorrow so you may regain your strength," said Voldemort. "As much as it pleases me to have you with me, you can not recover fully here."

"Why not?" said Harry curiously.

Voldemort chuckled again. "Because, Harry, I simply like talking with you too much. I would keep coming in and it would keep draining you and you would never be able to leave me." Voldemort laughed then. "Now *what* would the Ministry of Magic think of that?"

Harry smiled - had to.

"But you will still remember to visit me," said Voldemort. "Won't you Harry."

"Yes, Voldemort," said Harry. "We made a deal."

Voldemort smiled, standing up. He moved over to Harry's bed (Harry wasn't sure at what point he had gotten the bed but it was there), glancing at the IV bag and tube which ran into Harry's vein.

"This visit was unexpected but necessary," said Voldemort.

"Why do I get the impression it pleases you anyway," said Harry.

Voldemort was still smiling. "Ah Harry, how well you know me," said Voldemort. "Yes, indeed, it pleases me." Voldemort ran his fingers down Harry's face. Harry closed his eyes. "You please me very much."

Harry opened his eyes. Voldemort was staring hard into his face.

"As I have demonstrated, you need me as much as I need you, Harry," said Voldemort. "You always come back to me."

"And you are always there."

Voldemort nodded. "Yes, Harry. I know you understand."

Harry sighed, not wanting to think anymore but he didn't have to. Mrs. Granger came in with his medicine and Voldemort moved back to his chair.

Harry drank his draft and exhausted now, fell asleep.

The next time Harry woke up, he was in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. He felt half relieved, half disappointed. *I don't miss the pain but the conversation is always a challenge.*

Voldemort was doing it again.

Harry sighed and looked around. There was a screen around his bed so he couldn't tell if anyone else was in the ward. His IV was gone.

He heard voices across the room.

"Ron," called Harry.

Ron and Hermione came around the screen so fast, Harry laughed.

"Harry!" said Ron. "All right?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah," said Harry as Hermione came over and grabbed his hand.

They talked about how weird it was with things flying all over. Harry couldn't laugh though.

"Ron," said Harry. "Before Voldemort drained my strength, beds were flying at me. I had already broken my arm. I had absolutely no control of my magic. I could've hurt someone. No wonder everyone is so scared of me."

"Harry," said Ron. "No one knows about the bed incident and no one knows that Voldemort took you."

"What about the guys in the dorm," said Harry.

"They were told that Dumbledore took care of you. The Ministry can't know that Voldemort had to be called to control you."

"I know," muttered Harry. Then they might double the surveillance around him. "Anyway, I'm glad your mum was there," Harry said to Hermione. "If not for her-"

"My mum?" said Hermione.

"Yes," said Harry. "She took care of me - the muggle way. Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't," said Hermione with alarm. "Voldemort took my mother?"

"She seemed willing," Harry reassured her. "She wasn't scared. She told Voldemort what she needed and he got whatever she asked for. She was in charge."

"Really?" said Ron.

"Yes," said Harry. "He must have known that she was doctor and went to her for help."

"Well, if she knew it was for you," said Hermione. "She would have gone willingly. I just hope he took her back."

"Hermione," said Harry, again reassuringly. "I'm sure she's fine. Voldemort knows I'd be upset if he hurt your mother."

"Yes, I know, but-"

"So write to her," said Harry. "You can use Hedwig."

Harry returned to classes the next day and the same boredom resumed. He made it through thanks to Ron and Hermione. Ginger was the most helpful. She was now not only overly protective of Harry (the students attitude about Harry miffed her) but overly interested in Harry's powers. She seemed totally blown away by them and would often prod and nag him until he would show her some of the things he could do.

This gave Harry something to occupy his mind, trying to come up with little tricks to impress Ginger with.

Hermione had told Harry that she had indeed written to her mother and she was fine. Voldemort had sent someone to their house and told her parents that there was an emergency at school. She said that the Granger's were worried that they weren't allowed to see where they were going or know what the problem was. But Hermione said her mother had been amused when they got to the compound.

Voldemort had severely reprimanded the man who retrieved them for not telling them the problem and had even apologized to them.

Then once Mrs. Granger had seen it was Harry and what bad shape he was in, she agreed to stay while Mr. Granger was brought back home with instructions on how to cover up Mrs. Grangers absence.

*One step ahead.* That was Voldemort.

Harry moved quietly through the library, his eyes scanning the tables as he searched for Ginger. He had discovered how to tap his internal magic (like when he had forced Lucius and Severus to let go of him) by using his memory and had been able to produce actual fire in his hand.

He located Ginger and took her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"Harry?"

"Come with me, Ging," said Harry in a whisper. "I want to show you something neat."

Ginger giggled as Harry pulled her toward the back shelves of the library and looked around to make sure no one could see them.

"What is it?" whispered Ginger.

Harry raised his hand palm up and closed his eyes briefly. *I'm burning.* When he opened his eyes, a small flame burst from his palm, the flames dancing about 3 inches high.

"Doesn't that hurt," said Ginger, her eyes wide.

"No," said Harry. "It's a memory. And look." He held his other hand over the flames and they started changing colors.

"Harry, that is so cool," said Ginger, holding her hand up to see if she could feel the heat. "It's warm."

"Showing off, Potter?" came a sneer from behind.

Harry closed his hand, extinguishing the flame and turned to Malfoy.

"Spying, Malfoy," said Harry. "Or just indulging in some perverse voyeuristic tendencies?"

Ginger took hold of Harry's arms. "Let's just go, Harry," said Ginger. "He's just jealous."

Malfoy stepped up to Harry, looking him squarely in the face. "Oh no, Potter," said Malfoy, looking more serious than Harry had ever seen him and he totally ignored Ginger's comment. "I don't need to spy. I know as much as you do. And do you think I really care what you do with your little girlfriend?"

Without releasing Harry's gaze, he reached out and took a book off the shelf next to them. He glanced briefly at the spine of the book, then looked back at Harry. "Interesting subject," said Malfoy with a sort of bemused grin. "Prophecies."

He sent Ginger a glance then walked away.

Harry watched him until he was out of sight.

"Well that was weird," said Ginger.

Weird didn't even come close to describing it. Just how much *did* Malfoy know? Of course his father was Voldemort's right hand but just what does Lucius tell his son?

Was this more of Voldemort's manipulations to constantly keep Voldemort in his thoughts? Had he suddenly decided to put Malfoy to work? Or was Malfoy being suckered into this now too?

Malfoy had a semblance of Dumbledore's protection. Or had. But there was such a seriousness now in how Malfoy acted. Harry was getting another headache just trying to figure it out.

Harry wondered if he should just ask him. He'd helped Harry out before. But Harry didn't get the chance. He didn't see the boy at all except for the classes they shared and they were still a bore for Harry.

The boredom was getting so much that he would have even welcomed one of he and Malfoy's insult swapping sessions.



So despite the Ministry and despite the fact that he didn't have to, Harry found himself writing to Voldemort. He mostly complained of his boredom but he couldn't help mentioning some of the other stuff Harry had discovered he could do.

Voldemort wrote back.

*Harry, I can imagine how boring you find school now. I have taught you so much. And yes your internal power has indeed been re-enforcing itself. Visit with me and we can argue. Both of our exalted presence's need the mental stimulation.*

Harry laughed - had to.

"What?" said Ron, beside him at the table.

"Nothing," said Harry, shoving the letter into his robe pocket.

Harry guessed he really should work on a way to try and visit.

## Chapter 7

### Revelations

It was a couple weeks later that Harry had the opportunity to slip away to "visit" as was required in his "deal" with Voldemort. It was as Hogsmeade weekend and all Harry had to do was stay behind and he could manage to slip away.

To attempt this, he sat in the common room with his potions homework before him. Severus had assigned them a rather difficult assignment for the week and although Harry had finished it the day before, he knew he could bluff his way through using the homework to stay at the castle while Ron, Hermione and Ginger went to town.

"Ready, Harry," said Ron as he approached from the boy's dorm.

"Can't go," said Harry.

"Potions?" said Ron, looking at the stuff spread out before Harry. "I thought you finished that."

"I thought I had," said Harry. "Until I saw Hermione's. I totally screwed it up. I have to fix it."

"Want me to help?" said Ron.

"No," said Harry quickly. "I don't want Hermione to know I looked at her homework. You know how she gets."

"Well, I guess."

"Just bring me back something. OK," said Harry.

"Alright," said Ron, still looking suspicious.

"I'm ready," said Hermione as she stepped up to them. "Harry, what are you doing?"

"Trying to fix my potions homework, do you mind," said Harry, trying to sound irritated.

Hermione looked confused. Harry looked from Ron to Hermione. Ron looked as if Harry should fess up.

"All right," said Harry with annoyance. "I saw your paper, Hermione, and noticed how messed up mine was. I wasn't copying but now I have to fix it. You know how Snape gets with me now."

"Harry," said Hermione.

"Just go. I'm fine," said Harry.

Ron dragged Hermione out and caught Ginny by the robes as she entered the common room.

"Come along, little sister," said Ron. "Harry can't play right now."

"But-" said Ginny.

"I'll see you later, Ginger," called Harry.

Harry sighed as they all left, wishing he was with them but Harry had promised. After a full five minutes to make sure they didn't come back, he apparated to his chair in front of the fire.

Immediately screams of pain could be heard. Someone was being tortured. Harry sat up and looked across the compound. The Death Eaters were in a tight circle obviously watching someone being made an example out of. Voldemort and who ever the victim was were apparently in the circle.

Harry was in no mood to waste his time listening to someone (even if deserved) scream. Harry had promised to visit and so he would.

Harry transfigured and flew to a tree near the Death Eaters.

"Goyle," said Voldemort in a quite menacing voice. "You will not disappoint me again."

"No, master," cried Goyle, writhing on the ground. "I'm sorry, master."

Voldemort hit him again with the Cruciatus Curse. Goyle screamed.

Harry glanced around. Severus was nearby on the outer side of the circle. Harry hopped off the branch and flew to him.

Startled, Severus held up an arm to protect his face. Harry landed on his arm and Severus lowered it. Harry looked at him squarely.

Severus had not had the chance to look closely at Harry the first time that Harry transformed so he appeared surprised.

"My God," said Severus, taking in the hawk's green eyes and the silver feathers in the shape of a lightening bolt on his head.

Several Death Eaters murmured over the strange hawk that had flown to Severus Snape.

"What is going on down there?" demanded Voldemort.

"Master," said Severus. "We have a visitor. Notte you idiot, move." Severus stepped into the inner circle and held up his arm.

Harry looked over at Voldemort.

Voldemort laughed with delight.

"Goyle, you are fortunate, indeed. I am much too pleased now to finish with you," said Voldemort. "Get out of my sight."

Goyle scurried away while all the other Death Eaters turned to see what was so interesting.

Voldemort raised his arm. He could have said, "Come to me, Harry," the connotation was so clear, but only Lucius and Severus knew who he was. Harry also wanted to know how painful it would be. When Harry had transformed the first time and Voldemort had signaled, the pain had been less. How bad would it be?

Harry opened his wings and flew across the span toward Voldemort. the flinch zone, the pain was almost non-existent so Harry perched on Voldemort's arm. The pain was manageable.

Harry heard the Death Eaters around them.

"A black hawk?"

"Is it a sign?"

"What does it mean, Master?"

Harry looked at Voldemort who laughed and reached toward Harry's head. Harry instantly jumped off his arm and transformed on his way to the ground several meters away.

"The pain is less, Voldemort," said Harry. "But it's still there."

The Death Eaters gasped and murmured as Harry stood up.

"Enough," said Voldemort to his Death Eaters. "Leave us." He turned to Harry. "Very dramatic entrance, my son."

Harry smirked at him. "You taught me well."

Voldemort chuckled. "Come, Harry, speak with me," said Voldemort as they moved toward the fire. "Tell me, how are you to die this week?"

Harry laughed - had to. Voldemort knew how Professor Trelawney always predicted Harry's death.

"I've got the grim again," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "She's given up on Nagini?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows where she gets these pieces of pathetic predictions," said Harry. "Guess she figures I'm bound to die so she safe predicting it time and again."

"Still the pessimist, Harry?"

"Since I'm taking you with me, I'd think you wouldn't laugh," said Harry.

"Oh, Harry," said Voldemort. "If I took everything so seriously, I wouldn't be able to enjoy my power."

Harry stared at him.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Relax and enjoy life. Yours has been trying, but you have good friends and people who love you. This entire camp would lie and die for you. Relax and enjoy *your* power."

Harry had a problem swallowing it so he didn't comment. He changed the subject.

"Voldemort?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you really think you can take over the world?" said Harry.

"Once you join me," said Voldemort. "Yes I can. With you, I will be able to do anything. And actually it will be take charge of the world."

"Take charge?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "The hierarchy of the wizarding world is a mess right now. Long ago it was always the most powerful wizard who was Minister of Magic, the one most respected and most feared. Now it's a pitiful popularity contest."

"We can restore order to the chaos that is the Ministry, Harry, initiate great change."

"You can't do that by simply killing everyone who doesn't agree with you," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "I know that, Harry. But people can be stubborn and during my first reign, I didn't have you. I didn't foresee that I needed the balance of power to restore order."

Harry brain was starting to hurt again.

"But the killing-"

"Harry, how many people have I ordered killed?" said Voldemort.

"Karkaroff," said Harry. "And who knows who else you've ordered killed. I've never been in the conference tent."

"Harry, I haven't ordered anyone killed since your first threshold. I need the wizarding world to know you influence me, temper me. The balance of power.

"My legion has almost tripled since the graveyard because people are starting to see that the world needs change."

"Then why didn't you use Dumbledore for the balance of power?" said Harry.

"I told you, I didn't know I needed it until we met," said Voldemort. "Albus *is* a very powerful wizard but he is not an heir nor am I connected with him as I am to you. No, Harry. It must be you and I. The wizarding world will unite behind us and order will be restored."

It was like a light bulb clicked on in Harry's head. He got it. If Harry joined Voldemort, the world would be outraged, they'd feel betrayed and they would unite and would reorder the Ministry to destroy them both. But it was Harry's destiny to kill Voldemort. Once the world united, then Harry could kill him.

*But I'm not ready.*

"Soon, Harry," said Voldemort. "You will know when you are ready."

"That's getting very annoying," said Harry.

"What is?"

"That you know what I'm thinking," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "It's simply that I can read your expression," said Voldemort. "I know the struggle you must go through every time you face me."

"Do you?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "I've said before, your loyalty and your steadfastness is admirable. You have a fierce determination not to betray your parents."

"I won't," said Harry.

"I know," said Voldemort.

Harry was confused again. "You killed them."

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort, staring intently back at Harry. "Why?"

Voldemort was making Harry think again. Another test.

"My father was the heir," said Harry, still more confused than anything else. "But he wouldn't join you."

Voldemort nodded. "James Potter was a very powerful wizard."

"You could have used him for the balance of power," said Harry with dawning.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "I told you, I didn't know I needed it back then."

"But the prophecy-"

"Yes," Voldemort interrupted. "But I was a bit swept away by my own power, Harry. I just knew the heir of Gryffindor was against me."

"And he fought bravely," said Voldemort. "But he said something to me that I had forgotten until Goyle made the connection between us."

"What did he say?" said Harry breathlessly.

"He said, 'My heir will stop you' and you did, Harry. And when Goyle brought up the connection, I remembered the prophecy."

"So what are you saying?" said Harry. "That my parents knew?"



"I think they knew they had to protect you at all cost (which they would anyway being your parents)," said Voldemort. "But I think they knew of the prophecy and knew you had to live."

"You still killed them, Voldemort," said Harry, reminding himself as well.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "But if what I suspect is true, they not only died for you but for the wizarding world as well. I think Dumbledore knew you had to correct the chaos that had begun in the Ministry. He was reading the signs. Albus knew and he knows what will happen."

Now Harry's brain really hurt. Harry glanced at his watch. He tapped it, muttering, "What should I be doing?"

The watch flashed:

*You should be sitting in the library. Ron and Hermione are looking for you.*

Harry stood up and looked at Voldemort who was studying him intently.

"You know, Voldemort," said Harry. "I don't know which makes my head hurt more, you touching me or you talking to me."

Voldemort stood up. He didn't laugh. "The truth is sometimes painful," said Voldemort. "But I will not lie to you, Harry. When you accept your destiny, you will have control over your life. It will not hurt."

"I sincerely doubt that," said Harry. "And I'm still thinking about saying to hell with everything and going to Bulgaria."

Voldemort chuckled. "I know, Harry, but you won't. You are too steadfast to abandon your world now."

"More the pity," muttered Harry. "I'm leaving your exalted presence now."

"I will see you soon, my son," said Voldemort.

*Another nightmare.*

Harry found the book of prophecies from the shelf in the library then went back to the Common Room, looking for Ron and Hermione. Now he knew what had to be done and he needed some input.

The last person who had taken out the book was Malfoy and again Harry wondered how much Malfoy knew.

Walking down an almost empty hall, he wasn't paying attention and bumped into someone.

"Sorry," Harry and whoever he hit said at once. But Harry recognized the voice and turned. The other boy did too and Harry saw such sadness in his expression before it was covered with the normal Malfoy sneer.

"Watch where you're going, Potter," said Malfoy but his tone was lacking its usual maliciousness.

"Malfoy, are you alright?" said Harry.

Malfoy made a long suffering sound. "You are so pathetic, Potter," said Malfoy and he turned to walk away.

Harry stopped him and Malfoy glared at Harry's hand on his arm until Harry removed it.

"I'm serious," said Harry. "Are you alright?"

"Bugger off, Potter," said Malfoy and he walked away with the parting words, "My problems aren't any worse than yours are."

Harry stared after him, then realized that Crabbe and Goyle were nowhere to be seen. In fact, Harry couldn't recall seeing Malfoy with any of his fellow Slytherins recently, except at meals and even then Malfoy seemed to be distancing himself from them.

With a frustrated sigh, Harry continued his search for Ron and Hermione.

Once he found them, he dragged them into Myrtle's bathroom.

"Using this as your private conference room now," said Myrtle.

"Sorry, Myrtle," said Harry. "Do you mind?"

"You want me to leave?" said Myrtle looking insulted.

"Not necessarily," said Harry, but Myrtle had started to cry and flew down the toilet.

"So what's up, Harry?" said Ron.

Harry handed Hermione the book and she opened it to the first page Harry had marked. She read aloud.

*Through terror and mayhem the world will survive,*

*Amidst murder and chaos an heir will arrive*

*Confusion and fear will loom*

*A threat foreshadows doom*

*Who will be prepared to fight*

*When the heirs unite*

Hermione looked up at Harry. She started to speak but Harry stopped her.

"Go to the next one," said Harry.

Hermione opened the book to the next marked page and read:

*The heirs will unite with strength beyond measure*

*The balance of power will be restored, Justice re-lawed*

*Sacrifice the treasure*

Hermione looked up sharply. "No, Harry," she cried. "There has to be another way."

Ron looked confused.

"There isn't," said Harry. "We've been looking for years."

"This is just a stupid prediction," said Hermione. "Like Trelawney's stupid Inner Eye." She looked back at the book and pointed at the last one. "Look," said Hermione. "It even IS her stupid prediction."

"Right," said Harry. "Ever wonder what the first actual real prediction she made was?"

"What am I missing?" said Ron.

Harry turned away to pace.

"Harry is reading too much into these prophecies," said Hermione. "He thinks he has to join Voldemort so that the world will unite." She took a deep breath. "And then he has to kill him."

"And," said Ron still looking confused.

"And," said Hermione. "He's the treasure. He has to sacrifice himself."

"Harry," said Ron. "Is this that thing about if you kill Voldemort, you have to die because of all the connections between you and him?"

Harry only nodded.

"Wait a minute," said Ron with horror. "She called you the treasure in Divination that day."

"I know," said Harry.

"But there has to be another way," insisted Hermione.

Harry looked at her. "I don't see how," said Harry. "Even Dumbledore seems to know it. All this destiny and fate crap is making me sick. Voldemort makes it worse because he's so confident it's scary. He's

never lied to me and everything he says happens. He says it's only a matter of time."

Harry looked at Ron.

"I think I'm almost out of time," said Harry.

"Oh, Harry," cried Hermione.

Ron grabbed Harry's shoulder. "You know we're with you, Harry," said Ron. "Anything you need, anything you want me to do, I'm there."

Harry nodded gravely. "I know, Ron," said Harry. "I just don't know what to expect."  
"This is nuts," said Hermione. "We've faced death before. We'll get through this!"

"Hermione," said Harry.

"NO!" cried Hermione. "Don't get all brave about this. You know I won't let you die."

Hermione spun around and marched out of the bathroom.

Harry looked at Ron.

Ron shrugged. "She's right you know," said Ron. "We'll get you through this."

Harry could hope.

## Chapter 8

### Draco's Problem and Voldemort's Gifts

Several days before the Christmas break, Harry walked through the hall, Ginger beside him, her hand held tightly in his own. They had just left the common room and were on their way to Sunday breakfast.

Harry could sense more than see that they were being watched.

"This is getting really creepy," said Ginger softly.

Harry guessed she felt it too.

"I know," said Harry. "I wish they'd leave me alone."

"They won't," said Ginger. "Everyone is afraid."

Harry stopped and turned to her. He rested a hand on her cheek. "Are you afraid, Ginger?" said Harry. "I couldn't bear it-"

"No, Harry," Ginger interrupted. "You know I'm not afraid. I know you just as Ron and Hermione and the rest of the family does. We know you'll do the right thing." She placed her own hand on Harry's cheek. "And I know you wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone."

Harry leaned down and gently kissed her mouth.

"Thanks, Ging," said Harry. "That means a lot to me."

"Potter."

Harry looked around.

"What do you want, Malfoy," said Harry as Malfoy strode up to them. "Your voyeuristic tendencies are starting to get annoying."

Harry let go of Ginger and looked at Malfoy.

Malfoy was actually grinning. "Sorry to interrupt," muttered Malfoy and he glanced down at Ginger. "Hello, Ginny. Enjoying yourself, were you?"

Harry couldn't tell if he was trying to be nasty or just teasing, the latter being unheard of.

"What do you want, Draco?" said Ginger with some of her own irritation.

Malfoy looked at Harry and his expression became serious. He took a step closer and leaned toward Harry's ear.

"He's getting impatient," said Malfoy in a very soft voice. "My father says he's irritable and may do something drastic if you don't - well, you know."

Harry looked at Malfoy with suspicion. "So you do know about that."

Malfoy nodded. "My father said it pleases him that you have been writing but he wants to see you."

Ginger looked back and forth between the two. "What's going on?"

"I'll explain later," said Harry.

"Don't you trust your girlfriend, Potter?" said Malfoy with another mysterious grin.

"Will you be quiet, Malfoy." Harry grabbed Malfoy's arm and pulled him closer to the steps. "Look around," said Harry with disgust. "They're constantly watching me. And why did you drag Ginger into this."

"I know," said Malfoy. "And because she needs to know."

Harry blinked at him. "Why?"

"You can't be that stupid, Potter," said Malfoy. "You've got good friends. Use them. You need them."

"They don't understand," said Harry. "You don't understand."

Harry saw that sadness again, but it was fleeting. "Don't I?" said Malfoy. "Just go, he needs to see you."

"How?"

"Figure it out, Potter," said Malfoy as he turned and walked away.

Harry blinked at him as left again wondering just where Draco Malfoy's loyalties were.

Had Dumbledore sent Malfoy to him or had Voldemort?

Harry turned to Ginger. "I have to see the headmaster."

"I'll go too," said Ginger.

"No, I don't-"

"Oh, yes," said Ginger, grabbing Harry's arm and pulling him towards the stairs. "I should go too."

She had that stubborn determination on her expression as she lead Harry through the school and Harry sighed.

"All right," said Harry.

The gargoyle wasn't blocking the entrance so the two entered and went up the moving staircase.

"Ah, Harry, I assume -" he paused seeing Ginger. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Ginger crossed her arms and stared at Albus Dumbledore with a look that would have frightened anyone.

"Well, I see she is determined," said Dumbledore with humor glittering in his eyes. "Very well. Harry, you know what to do."

"Yes," said Harry but he hesitated. "Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why are you ok with this?"



"Because you have a binding agreement," said Dumbledore simply.  
"And-"

"Don't tell me," said Harry. "I'm almost ready."

Dumbledore nodded gravely.

"Ready for what?" said Ginger.

"You don't want to know, Ginger," said Harry. "Believe me." He took hold of her arms. "Focus on me, Ging."

"Where are we-"

What a nightmare.

Harry stared into the fire, feeling Ginger's grip tighten on his arm.

"Forget the question," said Ginger. "You have an agreement to visit him?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Master Harry. I'm glad you came," said Lucius Malfoy, stepping up to them. "I assume you've spoken to Draco."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy," said Harry.

Malfoy looked down at Ginger.

Ginger lifted her chin. "My blood is as pure as yours, Mr. Malfoy," said Ginger. "You can't touch me."

Lucius Malfoy actually smile at her. "A Weasley with wizarding pride," said Malfoy with satisfaction. He looked at Harry. "You have good taste in woman at least," he eyed Harry's ill fitting clothes with distaste.

Harry sighed. "Where is he?"

Malfoy's expression turned serious. "In his tent, my lord," said Lucius. "Brooding."

Harry almost wanted to laugh as he escorted Ginger across the camp. Voldemort - brooding? Interesting.

"Ginger," said Harry. "Are you sure-"

"Stop it, Harry," said Ginger. "You know I'm not afraid."

Harry sighed and opened the flap so Ginger could walk in first.

Voldemort stood up as they entered the tent.

"Ah, Harry," said Voldemort, sounding relieved and pleased at the same time. "And Miss Weasley. How nice to see you again." He sent Harry a curious look.

Harry made a frustrated gesture. "Women," he muttered.

Voldemort chuckled. With a wave of his wand, Voldemort changed the atmosphere of the tent from dark and brooding to bright and almost cheery. Several house elves came out with trays of refreshments.

Harry and Ginger sat down on the sofa, not far but out of the flinch zone from Voldemort's desk. Ginger still hadn't let go of Harry's arm and Harry got the impression that although she put on a brave face, she was still nervous.

"So," said Voldemort to Ginger. "How does it feel to have acquired the affection of the most powerful boy in the world?"

"Voldemort," said Harry.

"Stop being so modest, Harry. You know it's true," said Voldemort. "And let me gloat." Back to Ginger, he said, "Well, Miss Weasley?"

"Harry knows how I feel," said Ginger.

"Indeed," said Voldemort. He turned to Harry. "And how does Harry feel?"

Harry opened his mouth ready to tell Voldemort to mind his own business but felt Ginger's hand tighten around his arm. He closed his mouth. Voldemort was staring intently back at him.

"Don't you think that's a bit personal, Voldemort?" said Harry.

He looked down at Ginger and she reached up and touched his face.

"It's alright, Harry," said Ginger. "I understand."

"You could have just said that you weren't sure yet," said Voldemort.

Harry stood up, running a hand through his hair and paced across the room. Voldemort knew everything. Harry shouldn't have been surprised.

"Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry turned to him.

"Severus tells me that they still have you under constant surveillance."

"They do," said Harry.

"Doesn't that bother you?" said Voldemort.

Harry started pacing again. "Of course, it bothers me, Voldemort," said Harry. "But there's nothing I can do about it." Harry looked back at Voldemort. "And before you go that route with me about not being helpless, let me remind you that I'm not ready yet."

Voldemort chuckled.

"Anyway," Harry went on. "Dumbledore knows we have a deal and so does Sirius now, although I didn't tell him." Harry looked at Voldemort. "Did you?"

"No, Harry. Albus told him."

Harry nodded. "And obviously Ginger knows now and I noticed that Lucius knows." Harry looked at Voldemort again. "Why does Draco know, by the way?"

"Because I want him to know," said Voldemort simply. "He is the only other mutual contact we have through the school besides Severus."

Harry sighed. "I guess."

"He did tell you that I wished to see you, didn't he?" said Voldemort.

Now Voldemort had Harry's attention. "So you did send him?" said Harry.

"Of course," said Voldemort. "Lucius is completely loyal to me. As is his son."

Harry had seen evidence that this wasn't exactly the case but was starting to wonder.

"Anyway," said Harry. "You didn't have to get impatient. I would have come to visit in a few days."

"Oh," said Voldemort with interest.

"Yes," said Harry. "Sirius told me I should come for the Christmas break."

"Did he?" said Voldemort with a knowing grin.

Harry ignored it. "Yes."

"Did he tell you why?"

"No," said Harry feeling frustrated.

"Did you ask?"

"Of course I asked him," said Harry.

Voldemort grinned at him. "Would you like to know?"

Harry looked up. "Do you know?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Of course," said Voldemort.

"Tell me," said Harry.

"Albus is sending Sirius to spy on some of my Death Eaters in the Esperian province," said Voldemort simply. "To try to get the whereabouts of this compound."

Harry wasn't even sure where that was. "This doesn't worry you?"

"Oh no, Harry," said Voldemort. "Very few people know the actual location of this camp. My Death Eaters apparate directly to me through their link with the Dark Mark. That is the only way to get in here unless I want them too."

"Just give me a little more time, Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled.

"So why is Sirius sending me here?" said Harry. "Won't the Ministry find out?"

"Actually, the Ministry is unknowingly allowing it," said Voldemort. "Fools," he added with laugh.

"How?"

"They've ordered the school be emptied over the break with the exception of you - they must always know where you are - and the headmaster - who of course knows you must visit me - and one other teacher of Albus' choice."

"Don't tell me," said Harry. "Severus Snape."

Voldemort chuckled.

"And what about Hagrid," said Harry. "He lives there on the grounds. He'll miss me if I don't visit with him."

"Ah, Rubeus will be sent back to the giants," said Voldemort. "Pity about them. I was sure I would have more of them to rely on. But Albus was quick indeed with his emissaries."

Harry ignored the comment. "It seems like an awful lot of trouble just for me," said Harry.

"Just say the word, Harry," said Voldemort with another grin. "And neither one of us will have to worry about the Ministry or giants or anything else."

Harry smirked at him and turned to Ginger.

"Ginger," said Harry seriously. "You can't tell anyone about this. I mean it, not even Ron and especially not your parents."

Ginger sighed. "As honored as I am to be privy to this little secret life of yours, Harry," said Ginger. "I think Ron already knows."

Harry blinked at her. "Ron?"

"Yes," said Ginger. "Ever since the Hogsmeade visit, he's been muttering like an idiot about you."

"What has he been saying?"

"Stuff like 'what's Harry done now' and 'why won't he tell me'. It's making him nuts," said Ginger.

"And Hermione?" said Harry.

"Hermione just looks at him oddly and shakes it off."

"Ron figured it out before Hermione?" said Harry and he laughed. "Priceless." He looked at Ginger again.

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, I won't tell," said Ginger. "Who'd believe me anyway. 'That insipid little Weasley girl who was fool enough to trust something that she couldn't see where it kept its brain. What does Harry Potter see in her?'"

Voldemort laughed over her little tirade. "Oh, I see precisely what Harry Potter sees in you Miss Weasley."

Voldemort's comment sobered her. Ginger glanced at her watch.

"We really should be getting back, Harry."

Harry looked at own watch then looked at Voldemort as Ginger got up and took his arm.

"I'll be back," said Harry.

"I'll be here," said Voldemort.

*What a nightmare.*

And it was a nightmare. Harry couldn't stop thinking about how natural their conversations were, how easy it was to talk to him, knowing he'd tell him anything he asked and knowing it would be the truth.

Harry didn't really mind visiting and that was really bothering him. And the prospect of going back in a few days was actually comforting. Harry tried to convince himself that it was because at the compound he wouldn't be watched 24 hours a day and would have the freedom to once again eat, sleep or do whatever he wanted without restriction but he knew it was more than that.

He was curious to see what Voldemort would teach him. He wanted to know what else he was capable of doing with his magic and Voldemort's tests always showed him.

The only thing that darkened his thoughts about the break was that he wished he could take someone with him. Someone to talk to or at the very least play chess or exploding snap with. Harry briefly recalled how Cathy had read to him. At least he'd had a friend.

But now, if the Ministry found out that Harry had another agreement with Voldemort, they'd try to lock him up, or worse, lock up Harry's friends.

He said goodbye to Ginger in the Common Room.

She fussed with his collar. Harry suspected she did that on purpose because she had discovered how sensitive his neck was and just loved to drive him crazy.

"I wish I could go," said Ginger.

"I wish you could too," said Harry. His shoulder hit his ear as her fingertips brushed around it. "Stop it."

Ginger sent him a knowing little smile and lifted her face for his kiss. He hugged her hard. "I'll miss you, Ging," said Harry.

"And I'll miss you," said Ginger, lingering in his arms, head against his chest.

Harry held her away. "Go on. You'll miss the carriages."

Ginger nodded and kissed him again, then left. Harry stared after her until he felt another kiss, this time on his cheek. He turned to Hermione.

"It's not fair you know," said Hermione. "Making you stay here all by yourself."

"I'll be alright," said Harry. "Maybe I'll get some extra help for the N.E.W.T.s."

Hermione made a very unladylike snort. "Harry, be serious. You could get them all today if they gave them to you."

Harry sighed. "Maybe all but the Potions one," said Harry. "Think Snape might..."

Hermione laughed. "You will be careful," said Hermione. "Won't you, Harry?"

"Always," said Harry.

"And talk to Ron," said Hermione. "He's been acting strange - well stranger than usual."



Harry repressed his laugh. "Alright, Hermione. I will."

She kissed his cheek again and left.

Harry sat down to wait for Ron. He could hear the sounds of the boys in his dorm dragging their trunks down the stairs and he said goodbye to Dean, Seamus and Neville.

When Ron came down, he looked as if he wasn't even going to say goodbye.

Harry stood up. "Ron," he called.

Ron looked at him, then looked at his watch. "What?" said Ron with annoyance.

"I need to talk to you," said Harry.

"Really?" Ron didn't even try to hide his sarcasm. "All your little secrets getting too stressful for even famous Harry Potter to manage on his own?"

Now Harry was annoyed. "Will you just sit down and listen to me for a minute," said Harry. "You used to be damned good at being my best friend. Can we try it again?"

Ron looked stricken. "Harry-"

"Just sit," said Harry.

Ron sat down and Harry took the chair across from him. Then he let it all out. He tried to tell him everything. The deal, the Ministry's manipulations, that Dumbledore knew everything, how afraid he was that Voldemort was winning and even that he actually had figured out what it was it had to do and what it was.

"Well that's it, Ron," said Harry, almost hoarse from talking.

Ron blinked at him. "Blimey, Harry. Why the hell did you have to tell me everything?"

Harry felt like his chest caved in. Ron must have seen it on his expression.

He quickly said, "I'm kidding. Honestly, Harry. You know I'm with you."

"Are you sure, Ron?" said Harry. "Even if it comes-"

Ron stood up. "Even if it comes to that. I'm with you until the bitter end."

Harry stood up. "Thanks, Ron," was all Harry could say or choke as it came out.

It was an awkward hug they shared before Ron muttered, "Serves me right for saddling myself with the damn Boy Who Lived. All this weight of the world crap. Nauseating."

Harry couldn't help smiling. "Certainly makes me sick," said Harry.

"Yeah, well, when you leave for Bulgaria, you better make damn sure you take me."

"You bet," said Harry. "You'd better go."

"Yeah," said Ron. "Just yell if you need me."

"I will, Ron," said Harry.

Harry watched him leave and suddenly felt very alone. He had told Ron everything - that is - all the facts. And Harry was immensely grateful for Ron's sworn support, but Harry couldn't seem to be able to express - explain the feelings, the effect Voldemort was starting to have over him.

Every damned look, every calculated touch, every carefully constructed manipulation.

Ron had met Voldemort, had dealt with him, but he couldn't understand how dependant Harry was starting to become. Couldn't

conceive how it tormented Harry that Harry was starting to count on Voldemort always being there.

Harry sighed and heard nothing but silence echoing from the castle. He apparated to his tent and sat down on his bed. He grabbed a pillow and held it loosely on his lap.

Glancing up, he saw his reflection in the mirror over his dresser. He had let his hair grow a little so instead of a short untidy mess, it had a longer wilder look. His eyes were the same bright green but they were sad. His face although still thin had hardened. Harry didn't have to shave near as much as Ron did but there was a shadow of growth presently, darkening his somber features.

Harry looked away from his own sorrow and noticed the cabinet. He stood up and moved to the large intricately carved wooden cabinet that had never graced his room before.

"What the hell?" said Harry as he looked it over. Eight feet high and seven feet wide and at least four feet deep of what looked like solid mahogany. There were no knobs on the doors.

Harry tried to pull the doors open but couldn't.

He raised a hand. "Alohamora," said Harry.

Nothing.

"Try 'open'."

Harry startled and turned to see Draco Malfoy standing in the doorway.

"What do you want, Malfoy," said Harry turning back to the cabinet.

"Lord Voldemort sent me to see if you'd arrived yet," said Malfoy.

"So you just walked on in," said Harry.

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Rude of me, wasn't it?"

Harry turned back to him. Malfoy had his arms crossed over his chest, leaning on the wall and he had a strange grin on his face.

"I'd say it was," said Harry. He gestured at the cabinet. "Do you know what this is?"

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Don't you?"

"No," said Harry, looking back at it. "What did you say to do?"

Malfoy snorted. "Honestly, Potter. You are so pathetic."

"I grew up with Muggles," said Harry with irritation. "Excuse me for living."

Malfoy actually laughed. "No excuse for the Boy Who Lived," said Malfoy.

Harry let his chin fall and shook his head as he realized the joke. "None whatsoever," said Harry, but he couldn't help his own smile. "Poor, pathetic, Harry Potter," muttered Harry under his breath.

Malfoy heard him and snorted. "Pathetic, yes, but poor," said Malfoy. "That I know is lie." Harry sent him an irritated glance. "Even if you do dress the part."

"I hate to bust your misinformed bubble, Malfoy," said Harry. "But there's a perfectly good reason why I'm pathetic and appear poor."

"Oh, really?" challenged Malfoy. "I dare you to tell me."

Harry sighed. "I was clueless until my 11th Birthday."

"You're still clueless, as far as I'm concerned," said Malfoy.

So much for that. Harry turned back to the cabinet.

"Wait a minute," said Malfoy as if realizing Harry had been serious. "What do you mean?"

"Forget it," said Harry.

"No," said Malfoy. "Why was famous Harry Potter clueless."

"That's just it, Malfoy," said Harry. "I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" said Malfoy, looking confused.

"Now who's being pathetic?" said Harry. "I didn't know anything."

Malfoy just stared at him still looking confused.

"Why did you think I didn't say much in the robe shop that day?" said Harry.

"I thought you were shy," said Malfoy honestly.

"I had know idea what you were talking about," said Harry. "School houses, Quidditch-"

"You'd never heard of Quidditch?"

"I never heard of Hogwarts until I got my letter," said Harry. "I didn't even know I was a wizard."

Now Malfoy looked skeptical. "Yeah, famous Harry Potter didn't know he was a wizard."

"Yeah well, famous Harry Potter didn't know he was famous until Hagrid tracked us down and broke into the cabin where my aunt and uncle were hiding me."

"They were hiding you?" said Malfoy confused again.

"They didn't want me to find out I was a wizard," said Harry. "They think I'm a freak. They told me I got this scar in the car crash that killed my parents."

Malfoy's jaw actually dropped open. "They what?"

Harry only nodded. "Over night I went from being just Harry, treated no better than a house elf to famous Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived."

Malfoy stared hard at him and Harry could see the minute he believed him. "You didn't know about Voldemort?"

"Nope," said Harry. "Hermione knew more about me than I did when I first started at Hogwarts. Hell, you probably knew more about me than I did."

Malfoy continued to stare at him for a minute then he laughed.

"Thanks, a lot, Malfoy," said Harry. "So glad I've amused you."

Malfoy must have heard the bitterness. "I'm sorry," said Malfoy. "It's just so ironic."

Harry only nodded.

"Well that explains the pathetic part," said Malfoy. "What about the poor. You found out about the money."

"Yes. Hagrid showed me my vault," said Harry. "But there was no way I was going to let the Dursleys know I had inherited a fortune."

"That I can understand now," said Malfoy. "But you live with Black now."

"What's your point?" said Harry with frustration.

Malfoy gestured at the cabinet and Harry looked back at it. He reached out and touched the smooth surface of the door.

"Just tell it to open, Potter," said Malfoy.

Harry sent him a glance. "Open," said Harry.

The doors sprung open wide, revealing a vast amount of robes, cloaks, trousers, shirts and jumpers hanging in an orderly fashion.

Harry stared at it.

"It's a wardrobe, you git," said Malfoy.

"I can see that," said Harry, reaching out to touch one of the shirts. The softest material he ever felt slid through his fingers. "What's it doing here?" said Harry softly.

"Well obviously because it's yours."

"Mine?" said Harry with doubt as he touched another shirt. "This is more like the stuff you wear, Malfoy."

"Noticed, did you?" said Malfoy. "You possess quite possible the worst fashion sense imaginable."

Harry said nothing to that because he felt the burn on his head. He looked up as Voldemort stopped behind Malfoy. He met the red gaze.

"Why?" said Harry.

Malfoy looked confused.

"Harry," said Voldemort, startling Malfoy who looked about to fall over at seeing Voldemort behind him. "You are the most powerful boy in the world. I won't have my son dressing like a peasant."

"But-"

"Harry," interrupted Voldemort. "Don't you like them?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"Very good," said Voldemort with a smile. "What pleases you, pleases me, my son. I will see you both at dinner."

With that, he turned and left.

Harry stared after him, his fists had clenched, his jaw locked.

He turned back to the cabinet and reached out. Very slowly and carefully, he closed the doors and turned away from them.

"Potter?"

Harry looked up at Malfoy. He had almost forgotten about him.

"So now you know," said Harry.

Malfoy looked puzzled.

"Voldemort can't kill me," said Harry in a soft voice. "So he's driven me to insanity instead."

Malfoy smiled but it looked forced. "Well, if it's any consolation, he's gone off the deep end where you're concerned as well."

"It's not," muttered Harry as he fell into a chair.

"Well shake it off," said Malfoy. He opened Harry's wardrobe and pulled out some clothes. Tossing them on the bed, he said, "Wear that."

"Malfoy?"

He turned back. "What?"

"What kind of dinner is it?"

"Just dinner," said Malfoy. "There aren't many Death Eaters here yet."

"I don't dine with Death Eaters," said Harry tonelessly.

"So high and mighty are we," said Malfoy. "Fine, piss off the Dark Lord if you want to."

"Ask me if I care," said Harry, staring at the far wall, feeling alone again.

"Do you care?" said Malfoy.

The question shocked the hell out of Harry. Damn it if it did.

"Don't know which is worse, do you, Potter," said Malfoy. "The internal anguish or the external torture."

Harry's gaze shot up to stare at Malfoy. That was exactly one of the problems.



Malfoy crossed his arms again and nodded. "He's getting to you, isn't he?"

Harry looked away. "I'd rather have the physical torture."

"Maybe," said Malfoy. "But you still have choices."

"What do you mean?"

"He can't force you to do anything but visit him, right," said Malfoy. "You can chose to wear the clothes he's given you or not. You can accept his fortune or not. You can use the tent he has provided for you, or not. You can eat with his Death Eaters or not and he won't do a damn thing to you either way. I bet you could even lose your temper and he wouldn't punish you."

Harry blinked at him.

"I on the other hand am forced."

"How is he forcing you?" said Harry.

Malfoy sighed and moved back into the room.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," said Harry.

"No, I think I should," said Malfoy. "Mind if I sit down?"

Harry nodded his permission and Malfoy sat on the end of the bed.

"First off, I don't have half the tolerance for pain that you or my father have."

"Fear of torture?" said Harry.

"For starters," said Malfoy. "You've seen him torture with the Cruciatus Curse, I know." Malfoy went on, "But have you ever seen him punish anyone with the Dark Mark?"

"No," said Harry. "I didn't know he could."

Malfoy nodded. "With the Dark Mark, he has almost complete domination over the Death Eaters. He can punish and reward with it."

Harry listened with interest.

"You come when he calls, or you're punished. You do what he says when he says it, or you're punished. You don't do it to his satisfaction, you're punished. You please him and you're rewarded. You betray him and you're dead."

Malfoy rubbed the back of his neck as if a knot had formed there.

"Go on," said Harry softly.

"My father is a very powerful wizard," said Malfoy without his usual arrogance. "And he has an exorbitant amount of pride. He was forced to publicly renounce his master once for my mother and I and to spare the family name, but he will not do it again. He's sworn it to Lord Voldemort and to my mother and me. Thusly, he will do the Dark Lord's bidding or take the consequences."

Harry could see where this was going and he met Malfoy's gaze. The sadness was back and Draco didn't try to conceal it.

"He want's you," said Harry. "Doesn't he?"

Malfoy nodded. "If I don't do what I'm told, it's my father's fault." Malfoy looked away. "Ever watch someone you love tortured because of something you did or didn't do?"

"No," admitted Harry. "But he's used that-"

"Exactly, which is why I knew you would understand why I'm here."

Harry lowered his voice. "But what about Dumbledore?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I lead a double life."

Harry slumped back in his chair.

"Which is exactly what you're doing," said Malfoy. "Sneaking to visit without the Ministry finding out."

Harry stared at Draco Malfoy. Who was this boy? He was very different than the swaggering arrogant son of a bitch he knew from school. Then it hit him. He knows how it feels.

"You do understand," said Harry softly.

Malfoy nodded and stood up. "So now you know," said Malfoy.

Harry nodded back.

"Malfoy," said Harry. "I know you took out that book on prophecies. Have you read the prophecies?"

"Of course," said Malfoy. "Required reading for a Death Eater."

"You're - er - I mean, you're not one yet, are you?"

Malfoy pulled up his sleeve. His skin was unmarked.

"Not yet," said Malfoy, a shadow of a smile surfaced. "That's going to be one hell of a fight between my parents when that day arrives." He looked at Harry. "So what about the prophecies?"

"Do you think I'm supposed to join Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Are you asking me my opinion, Potter?" said Malfoy.

"Yes," said Harry.

Malfoy stared hard at him for a moment then paced a few steps.

"Well," said Malfoy, "if you believe in all that destiny and fate crap, than I'd say you were screwed."

"Great," muttered Harry.

Malfoy snorted. "But if you look at it more symbolically, then the fact is that you've already 'united.'"

Harry sat up. "What do you mean?"

Malfoy continued to pace as if he'd already done some thinking on this and it gave Harry some comfort to know that he, Ron and Hermione weren't the only ones racking their brains over what was supposed to happen.

"Well," said Malfoy. "You two have been sucking power off each other for a couple of years now. He's given you powers beyond belief. You're both a part of each other now - which is what is tearing you apart and which is frustrating Voldemort."

"What?"

"You've gotten to him, Potter," said Malfoy. "He didn't expect it to happen but it has. When you don't visit, he goes berserk. When you are here, he's totally different, relaxed, confident, even happy." Malfoy looked at Harry again. "And you, as much as you hate it, you find the need to come back here."

Harry closed his eyes.

"It's like you've magically bonded, Potter," said Malfoy. "And there is nothing either one of you can do about it."

Having Harry's deepest fears spoken out loud by a sort of neutral party made Harry's chest clench up. He opened his eyes. Malfoy was looking at him from across the room. Harry swallowed.

"And," Harry prompted.

"And," said Malfoy with an odd grin, "if I were you, which I'm glad I'm not."

Harry grimaced.

"I'd enjoy all this." Malfoy gestured around the room. "Accept all his gifts and enjoy it while you can. Then," said Malfoy. "When it comes down to the ultimate choice..." he trailed off.

"What," said Harry, desperately hoping Malfoy may have the answer that kept eluding him and his friends.

"Only you can answer that," said Malfoy too seriously for Harry.

"That's encouraging, Malfoy," muttered Harry. "Thanks a lot."

Malfoy sighed and Harry lifted his gaze to meet his again.

"Oh don't be so pathetic, Potter," said Malfoy. "The world doesn't need anymore tragic heroes." He glanced at his watch. "Dinner is in half an hour, and it's a free menu meal, which are usually good." He glanced at the clothes he had thrown on Harry's bed. "Test my theory, Potter," said Malfoy. "See how pleased he is when you show up at dinner dressed to kill."

With that, Malfoy strolled out.

Harry automatically got up and moved to the bathroom. He showered quickly, pondering Malfoy's words. Strange. Malfoy did know what Harry was feeling. Whereas he couldn't explain (didn't know how) to Ron, Draco Malfoy knew and not only knew but had felt some of it first hand.

Draco didn't want to be a Death Eater, that much was obvious, but rather than see his father suffer, he went through the motions. No wonder he was distancing himself from the other Slytherins.

Harry guessed, as bad as Lucius was, he was still Draco's father and Draco must love him. Harry had seen Lucius do as much for Draco as well. How far would Lucius let Draco go? Harry wondered.

He moved back to the bedroom, drying his hair and looked at the clothes Malfoy had told him to wear.

Enjoy it while you can.

"Why not."

Harry put them on and almost sighed as he pulled the red silk shirt around him. Not only did the clothes fit him to perfection but the feel against his skin was almost sinful.

He stepped in front of the mirror as he tucked in the shirt and was surprised at his reflection. The sadness in his expression was gone. Also gone was the skinny boy in hand-me-down oversized clothes. Gone was the repressed, beaten boy lied to until his 11th birthday. Before him was a 17-year-old young man, looking almost self-confident.

Harry glanced at his watch. Five minutes. On a whim, he raised his hand.

"Commentary," said Harry.

*Mr. Padfoot agrees that Harry should enjoy it while he can.*

*Mr. Mooney thinks Mr. Padfoot is taking this too lightly and Harry should proceed with caution.*

*Mr. Prongs knows that his son will do what he has to do.*

*Mr. Wormtail suggests that Master Harry hurry. The master is waiting.*

Harry smirked at the watch. Sometimes those four were absolutely no help. He looked back at the mirror and eyed his hair. Grabbing a brush, he attacked the untidy mass until it looked almost the same as the way Sirius wore his.

Harry grinned then frowned. Voldemort would hate it. He shook his head and his bangs fell naturally over his forehead. His scar wasn't completely covered but his hair looked more like the way Harry normally wore it.

He turned to the wardrobe and searched the contents for a cloak. Damn Malfoy. He hadn't picked one out. Harry had never had so many clothes to choose from in his life. Ultimately, he pulled out a black one. Since his trousers were black, he guessed it should do.

Harry fastened the gold clasp at his shoulder and spied the small box within the wardrobe. Opening it, he found a vast display of jewelry: rings, watches, chains.

This must have cost a fortune.

Enjoy it while you can.

Harry sighed and picked out a gold chain with a medallion in the shape of a phoenix with gem stone eyes, one red and one green, and clasped it around his neck.

He moved through the tent and out into the compound. He'd say one thing about Voldemort's gifts - he spared no expense and he had excellent taste.

## Chapter 9

### Tests and Temptations

There were perhaps 20 or 25 Death Eaters congregating in the clearing across the compound. Behind them was a long table set up under a tarp, even if the tarp was unnecessary. The compound was sealed against the weather and climate controlled.

As Harry walked, he saw Voldemort move from a small group to Draco and Lucius Malfoy. Draco was looking at the ground but Voldemort was obviously addressing him.

Harry saw Draco nod then he looked up toward Harry's tent. Both Lucius and Voldemort followed Draco's gaze.

Harry approached them and Voldemort did indeed look delighted.

"Ah Harry," said Voldemort. "You look splendid. Come we will start."

The Death Eaters all moved around the table and they all stood behind a chair waiting for Voldemort. There appeared to be some sort of ranking order to the seating because the ones at the far end Harry didn't recognize.

"How *did* you manage to pick out a cloak and jewelry to match," said Draco at Harry's ear as they moved around the table.

Harry sent him a grin. "I guess I'm not as inept as you thought."

Draco snorted. "As I suspected - sheer luck."

Harry smiled and shook his head as Draco stopped at a chair.

Voldemort was settling himself into his chair which Harry thought looked more like a throne, at the head of the table. Lucius was on his left and there was an empty chair beside him. Harry was on Voldemort's right, Draco beside him and Harry leaned toward the other boy.



"Is your mother supposed to be here?" whispered Harry, indicating the empty seat beside Lucius.

"No," Draco whispered back. "Snape's supposed to be here."

"Harry."

Harry looked up at Voldemort who indicated Harry's chair.

Harry realized that when he sat down, he'd be in the flinch zone. He wouldn't be able to get through the first course without getting a full blown headache. Harry glanced around. The Death Eaters were waiting for Harry to sit down.

Harry leaned toward Voldemort. "Can I switch seats with Draco," said Harry softly.

Voldemort looked not only insulted but hurt.

Bracing himself, Harry reached out and laid a hand on Voldemort's shoulder.

"I forgot to bring Tylenol," whispered Harry. Voldemort stared into Harry's eyes. Harry shrugged. "I'm here, Voldemort," said Harry pointedly.

"Hmm. Yes I know," said Voldemort then he chuckled as Harry removed his hand. "Of course you may, Harry," said Voldemort. "I should have foreseen that." To Draco he said, "Draco, my boy, sit here." He indicated Harry's chair.

Harry and Draco switched and Harry sat down. Everyone else did then too and the chatter started immediately as food and wine appeared on the elegantly set table. The candelabras lit themselves.

Avery was sitting on Harry's right but Harry had no idea what he and the two Death Eaters in front of him were discussing. Lucius was talking to Voldemort about some unnamed demonstration, which obviously included Draco because Draco nodded several times.

Harry reached for his goblet, feeling alone again. The bubbling liquid tickled his tongue and Harry looked inside the cup at the clear fluid. He took another sip.

"This is good," Harry muttered, unintentionally aloud.

Draco looked over his arm into his cup.

"Champaign," said Draco.

Harry looked at him. "Really?"

Draco smirked at him. "Potter-"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry, waving his hand. "I know - I'm pathetic."

Draco laughed and picked up his cup. He clinked it to Harry's.

"What are we drinking to?" said Harry.

Draco was thoughtful. "How about to Gryffindor moronity," said Draco.

Harry smirked at the pun but knocked his glass to Draco's anyway and they drank.

Harry had a strange feeling that his relationship with Draco Malfoy was going to alter. Oddly, it didn't bother Harry. He didn't quite feel so alone at that moment and Draco didn't turn away.

He changed the subject completely to a topic that they both found fascinating - Quidditch. The very subject brought him up short, however.

"Wait a minute," said Draco, looking astonished. "That was your first time a broom, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"First year," said Draco. "When I stole Longbottom's remembrall. You'd never been on a broom before, had you?"

Harry shrugged. "I'd never even seen one."

Draco rolled his eyes. "No wonder McGonagall made you Seeker despite our age."

Before long, they were both submerged in an enthusiastic debate about racing brooms. They didn't even notice when the table went silent.

"Master Harry," Avery interrupted them.

Harry and Draco looked up as a black robed, hooded and masked figure approached Voldemort and stopped beside his chair.

"You're late, Severus," said Voldemort sharply.

Snape removed his mask. "I know, Master," said Severus Snape. "I am sorry, but-" He leaned down and spoke softly next to Voldemort's ear.

Voldemort let out a long suffering sigh. "Idiots," muttered Voldemort. "I told Richardson exactly what to do with anyone who-"

"I know, My Lord," said Severus. "But he was so pleased with who it was that he was sure you would want to know."

Voldemort's eyes moved briefly to Harry then he turned back to Severus.

"Very well," said Voldemort. "Sit down, Severus." He looked down the table. "McDade," he called.

The Death Eater instantly got up and moved to Voldemort's chair.

"Yes, Master?"

"Go immediately to the Esperian province and tell Richardson I will be there in two hours," said Voldemort.

*The Esperian province? That's where Sirius-*

Harry stood up abruptly. Voldemort raised his hand without looking at Harry as if expecting this reaction.

"And tell him," Voldemort went on to McDade, "No one is to touch the prisoner until I get there."

"Yes, master."

"And," added Voldemort in a menacing tone, "if the prisoner is in less than perfect condition when I get there, I will be most displeased."

"Yes, master," said the Death Eater again.

"Go now," said Voldemort. "And return straight away."

With that, McDade bowed, grabbed his cloak and left.

"You should have sent me, My Lord," said Lucius Malfoy, with a glance at Harry.

Voldemort finally turned to Harry. Harry was still on his feet, his fists clenched.

*Oh God - Sirius. And Voldemort had known the whole time he'd be caught.*

Voldemort simply stared at Harry, as if just waiting for Harry to loose his temper, which Harry was very close to doing.

*You could even loose your temper and he wouldn't punish you.*

But there was something else going on. Harry felt it.

*Another test?*

More than likely.

*You've gotten to him, Potter.*

*Accept his almighty protection.*

*You know I won't hurt anyone you care about...*

*What pleases you, pleases me. You are my son.*

Harry stared back at Voldemort. Draco was looking back and forth between them, a puzzled look on his face.

Voldemort wanted to know how far Harry would trust him.

"You will take care of this problem?" said Harry finally.

"Of course, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry inclined his head. "That pleases me," said Harry.

Voldemort laughed with delight as Harry sat back down and talk resumed around the table.

"What was *that* all about?" said Draco quietly.

Harry almost said '*nothing*' but stopped himself. Normally he wouldn't be able to tell anyone about the emotional struggle he had just gone through but he remembered that Malfoy understood.

"It was another test," said Harry.

"Oh," said Draco with interest.

"Do you know where the Esperian province is?" said Harry.

Malfoy shrugged. "Up north somewhere. There are some wizarding farms there. I think the lord has-" He cut himself off and looked at Harry.

"Dumbledore sent Sirius to the Esperian province to spy," Harry told him.

"The Death Eaters caught Black?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Malfoy sighed. "And Voldemort wanted to see if you would trust him to take care of it."

"Exactly."

"He doesn't let up with you, does he?" said Draco.

"No," said Harry quietly.

"You should have Granger look up Bulgaria for you," said Draco.

Harry looked over at him. Draco was grinning. Harry laughed and picked up his cup. Draco picked up his too.

"Now there's a plan," said Harry, hitting his cup to Draco's again.

Neither one of them saw Voldemort's smug grin as he watched the exchange.

Harry left his tent the next morning and went straight for food. He was hungry. Turning toward the fire with a full plate, he noticed the crowd of Death Eaters in the clearing - a lot more than had been there last night.

Voldemort wasn't in his usual chair by the fire, in fact, his chair wasn't even where it usually was. Curious, Harry put his plate down by his chair and moved toward the Death Eaters.

He spotted Voldemort's chair and went toward it, flinching as he stopped beside it.

"Voldemort," said Harry.

Voldemort looked up at him. "Ah, Harry," said Voldemort. "Good morning."

"The problem in the Esperian province?" said Harry.

Voldemort smiled. "There is no problem in the Esperian province."

Harry inclined his head. "Thank you." With a glance at the clearing in front of them, he asked, "What's going on?"

"A demonstration of skill," said Voldemort.

Harry noticed Lucius and Draco Malfoy enter the open area and remembered the conversation he had heard mentioned last night at the table.

"What kind of skill?" said Harry.

"Fencing," said Voldemort. "A somewhat archaic art but fascinating to watch those with skill."

Harry watched both Malfoys remove their robes and saw the swords in intricately designed sheaths belted around their hips.

"Lucius is a master swordsman," said Voldemort. "And of course Draco is his protégé. It pleases me to watch them spar occasionally."

Harry watched with interest as they both turned to Voldemort and held up the sword in salute then slashed the blade down with a swipe to their sides. Then they removed the sheaths for freer movement and saluted each other in the same manner. They took their stances.

Lucius began the 'practice' and throughout the thrusting and parrying Harry could hear him softly calling out instructions to his son. Lucius Malfoy was indeed incredible to watch as he put Draco through the paces of form and balance.

Harry stood transfixed. *I wish I could do that.*

It was so graceful. The flashing swords (no practice swords what they used, but four foot shining weapons) mesmerizing, the steel clanking like a rhythmic beat.

When Draco was disarmed, Lucius turned to Voldemort and saluted him again as he did before. Draco retrieved his sword and saluted also. They sparred several times and Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Father and son practicing a shared art form.

It made his chest hurt with a combination of envy and respect but Harry couldn't look away.

When they were done, the Death Eaters dispersed and Harry watched as Lucius went to Draco and laid a hand on his shoulder, clearly giving him praise and more instruction.

"Harry?"

Harry turned his head and realized he had stood the whole time next to Voldemort's chair.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" said Voldemort.

Harry nodded and looked back at the pair. "Do you think - if I ask-" Harry cut himself off. Yeah like Lucius might teach him. Harry's relationship with Draco might be changing, as it was now it was still obscure, but Lucius certainly wouldn't want anything to do with Harry.

"What, Harry?"

"Nothing," said Harry and he went back to his breakfast, which even though it was cold, Harry ate it, still thinking of the fencing match.

He spent most of the morning in his tent doing some of his Holiday homework. When Draco came in just before lunch, Harry was delighted but covered it.

"Don't you ever knock, Malfoy," said Harry, but without much heat.

"Would you have invited me in if I had?" said Malfoy with a note of challenge in his voice.

Was this it? Make or break time? Harry felt like the moment Malfoy had extended his hand on the train their first year.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I would have," said Harry but it was grumbled.

Malfoy laughed as he moved toward Harry's desk. "Don't be so pathetic, Potter," said Malfoy as he looked at what Harry was doing. "I'm really not so bad."

"Yeah, I guessed that."

"Still haven't finished your potions assignment, I see," said Malfoy.



"Well, I've never been that good at it, but Snape expects 110% from me now," said Harry. "Must be nice to be his star pupil."

"Try paying attention in class," said Malfoy, dropping into one of the chairs in the office.

"I do," said Harry in defence. "Did you want something? Or did you just want to chat about school?"

"Actually, I came to see if you brought your Transfiguration book," said Malfoy. "I left mine at school and that is one subject where you have the whole school beat. I heard about some of your other - um - performances the first few weeks of school and while I think the piggy bank was the best, they sounded amusing."

Harry shrugged. "I was bored," said Harry. "And no I didn't bring my book, but I can go back and get it if you want."

"You would?"

"Sure," said Harry. "It's not really that difficult for me, remember."

"Yeah, being the heir and all," said Malfoy.

"I'll go at lunch," said Harry.

"You're not going to lunch?" said Malfoy.

Harry shook his head. "Too many Death Eaters," said Harry.

"Scared, Potter," said Malfoy with half a grin.

"Terrified," said Harry.

"Of what," said Malfoy with doubt.

"The way they look at me," admitted Harry.

"How do they look at you?" said Malfoy, grinning again.

"Damn it, Malfoy, you know what I mean."

Malfoy laughed softly. "Yeah, I just wanted to see if you would say it."

"Bastard," said Harry with laugh.

Malfoy laughed too and with a glance at his watch stood up. "Well since I don't have the option of not dining with Death Eaters, I've got to go."

"OK," said Harry. "I'll bring the book by a little later."

"Thanks," said Malfoy and he moved toward the door.

"And Malfoy," said Harry. Malfoy stopped and turned back. "That was really great this morning. I mean the fencing. You're really good."

Malfoy smiled. "I've been fencing since I was six," said Malfoy. "I'm no where near as good as my father but I really love it."

"I could tell," said Harry. "It was incredible to watch." Harry had to fight to keep himself from mentioning how badly he wanted to learn.

"Thanks," said Malfoy and he left.

Lunch was brought to him by a house elf - Voldemort would have known that Harry wouldn't be joining them and after he ate, Harry apparated back to the Gryffindor common room. He went up to the dorm and got his Transfiguration book.

When he returned to the common room, Harry was surprised - although he probably shouldn't have been - to find Dumbledore waiting.

"Hi, Professor," said Harry. He held up the book. "Homework."

Dumbledore nodded and appraised Harry with curiosity.

"What?" said Harry, looking down at himself. Then he noticed his clothes. "Oh, um-"

"Never mind, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I see he is still treating you well."

"Er, yes," said Harry, suddenly uncomfortable. He changed the subject. "The ministry," said Harry. "They-"

"They still do not have a clue," said Dumbledore.

"And have you heard from Sirius," said Harry.

"Sirius is fine," said Dumbledore. "Although he was not able to ascertain any useful information. I have sent him to check on Hagrid with the giants."

Harry nodded.

"Well I must be going," said Dumbledore. "Lot's to do. And Harry," Harry looked up. "Try not to worry. And try to have a good Christmas."

Dumbledore could have added, "for it might be your last", he looked so solemn but Harry chose to ignore it.

*Enjoy it while you can.*

Harry sighed as Dumbledore left and apparated back to his tent. Book in hand, he left the tent and immediately noticed the large tent being erected at the end of the compound, just to the right of Harry's tent. It was hard to miss because some trees had to be moved, which Harry noted with fascination that they were magically moved and not torn down.

He went to the Malfoy's tent and called Draco. He entered at Malfoy's say and noticed that Lucius wasn't there. Draco was sitting behind one of the two desks in the office Harry had entered. Although it wasn't as grand as his own, he did find it a bit cozier. Maybe the fact that it was shared with his father, maybe that there were traces of a woman's touch here and there.

Harry laid the book on Draco's desk.

"Thanks," said Malfoy.

"What's with the new tent?" said Harry.

"Don't know," said Malfoy. "My father does though, but he seems sort of unsure what to make of it."

"Make of what?"

"Don't know that either," said Malfoy, looking a little perplexed. "He was with Lord Voldemort earlier and he came back looking -"

"Looking?"

"Well, nervous," said Malfoy. "And somewhat surprised."

Harry sighed. "Yes, well, Voldemort can do that."

They talked some more about homework and Harry even relented and showed Malfoy his animagus form, which seemed to impress Malfoy.

When he left the Malfoy's tent that afternoon, he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off the new tent. It appeared to have been completed as there was no one around it. Harry glanced around and noticed that no one was around at all. Harry guessed there was meeting and as he passed the conference tent, his theory was confirmed as he heard voices from within.

Curious, Harry approached the tent and was about to reach for the flap when a man emerged. He took a step back and looked up.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Malfoy," said Harry, taking another step back. Lucius Malfoy still unnerved him.

"Curious, Master Harry?" said Lucius.

"I-I just wondered-"

Lucius' hand grasped his shoulder.

"Then come in," said Lucius. "This was constructed for you."

"Me?"

"Yes," said Lucius. "Anything you ask him, he will do."

"But," said Harry confused now. "I haven't asked him for anything-"

"Didn't you?" said Lucius as he steered Harry into the tent.

The tent was indeed huge although most of it was empty space but there was a hard wood floor that had a varnished shine. It was longer than it was wide and on the far long wall was table. There was only one bookshelf but the walls were strewn with a vast display of swords.

"Wow," said Harry.

"It's just been completed," said Lucius. "I was just sent to inspect it to insure it was suitable for you."

"I-"

"You *did* express an interest to learn the art of fencing, didn't you?"

"Well, yes," said Harry. "But I didn't think..."

"Didn't think what?"

"Well, that you'd teach me."

Harry moved toward the wall to look with awe at all the different types of swords displayed on it. They were beautiful.

"I will do what my master tells me to do," said Lucius with no animosity in his voice.

"But-"

"Master Harry," said Lucius. "Listen carefully."

Harry looked at him, still unnerved. They were alone in the tent.

"Fencing is one of my little pleasures and I do indeed know how good I am. Passing the knowledge to my son was also a great joy to me even if his prowess has proven less than my own."

"I thought he was quite good," said Harry.

"Don't interrupt," said Lucius. "Draco has peaked I believe. There is nothing more to teach or show him. Practice and experience is all he needs now."

"I have been asked to teach you, which I will do if you wish it. If you show interest and talent, it will be a pleasure for me. If you merely go through the motions without any real enjoyment and enthusiasm for the skill, it will be a chore."

"Fencing can be very relaxing, challenging and fun and it is a good form of exercise. What you put into it will be whatever pleasure you get out of it."

Harry mind started racing with excitement. Lucius was going to teach him.

"So, what's it to be, Master Harry?"

Lucius was asking him.

*My father will do anything the master tells him.*

*Enjoy it while you can.*

Harry, still by the wall, reached up and removed a sword, gripping it to feel it's weight. Harry had handled a sword before. This one was far lighter than Godric Gryffindor's.

Harry turned to Lucius and saluted him in the way he had seen Draco and Lucius do that morning.

"When can we start?" said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy's lips curled into a smug sort of satisfied grin. "Very well," said Lucius. He reached into his robes and pulled out a book. He stepped toward Harry. "We will begin tomorrow just after breakfast," said Lucius as he held out the book. "You will familiarize yourself with this book."

Harry took it and flipped through some pages.

"It contains the ethics, codes of honor as well as the basics of form, balance and stances," said Lucius. "It *is* a noble art, Master Harry. I teach and practice by the rules."

Harry nodded absently, running his hands over a page of the book as if Lucius had just given him gold.

He looked up at Lucius. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," said Harry. "I mean it. I'll try not to disappoint you."

A strange expression came over his face. "See that you don't," said Lucius and he turned and left the tent.

Harry looked around the room. The tent had been constructed for the sole purpose of teaching Harry because he had expressed the interest to learn.

Another one of Voldemort's gifts? Had Voldemort predicted Harry would want to learn and had therefore staged the demonstration that had held Harry captivated.

Harry frowned. More than likely.

"Do you care?" he heard Draco's voice and looked up. Draco stood at the entrance to the tent.

"Hell no," said Harry. "Not this time."

Draco nodded. "Didn't think so," said Draco and he left.

Harry looked back down at the book, moving toward the door. He went to his own tent and immediately started on the book.

## Chapter 10

### Fencing and Friendship

Harry almost choked on his food as he rushed through breakfast the next morning. He had read the entire book last night, eagerly trying to absorb the information so that he didn't look like a complete fool.

Once inside the tent - Lucius wasn't there yet - he spread a number of practice swords on the table and began testing them for weight, balance and length.

Lucius came in and studied the scene. He nodded. "Very good," said Lucius. "You have started the book."

"I, er, read the whole thing," said Harry hesitantly.

"Really," said Lucius although he sounded delighted. "Ok, then. Take off your robe."

Harry saw Lucius removing his and shrugged out of his own and hung it up.

Lucius eyed him critically. "I see you are utilizing the wardrobe the Master provided for you."

Harry shrugged. "After far too large hand me downs, it's nice to have clothes that fit," said Harry. "Not to mention that this material is simply wonderful."

Lucius actually laughed at his comment. "It is indeed but you are no pauper, Master Harry. You could have bought your own."

"Me," said Harry aghast. "I may have money but I have zero fashion sense which your son can attest and does so frequently."

Lucius laughed again.

"I still wonder who Voldemort got to pick it all out," said Harry.

"Do you?"



"Well I certainly can't see Voldemort doing it himself," said Harry.

"No," agreed Lucius with an amused tone. "But your physical stature is so similar to Draco's..."

Harry looked up. "Not you?"

Lucius inclined his head. "And Draco. As you have noticed, Draco has a flair for dressing to impress."

Harry was disconcerted by the information but had to agree.

"So now what?" said Harry.

"Hold out your arm." Harry did and Lucius measured it. "You have an advantageous reach, Master Harry."

"Mr. Malfoy, as long as we're going to do this, could you just call me Harry."

Lucius looked at him skeptically.

"At least in here," said Harry. "Technically you are the master and I'm the student, so-"

"Very well," said Lucius. "Then you will call me Lucius."

"I-"

"Harry."

"All right," said Harry.

"Good." Lucius circled him appraising his stature then he picked up a practice sword from the table. "This will do for starters."

Harry took the sword and moved it around to get the feel of it.

"Since you already know the salute, which you did perfectly yesterday, we will move on to posture and initial position."

Harry took one of the classic positions he had seen in the book, brandishing the sword toward Lucius.

Lucius swung around quickly, a sword, which Harry hadn't seen, in his hand. Harry angled his own sword and thrust up to meet it. Lucius held the sword hard against Harry's to test his strength. Harry held it firmly.

"Well, well," said Lucius.

"Well, well, what?" said Harry, meeting his gaze between the two blades.

"It seems I've gotten my hands on a Natural," said Lucius.

"A Natural what?" said Harry.

"It was the same with me, Harry," said Lucius. "Flying and fencing."

Harry couldn't help his smile. "So it's to be a pleasure and not a chore."

"Indeed," said Lucius. "For both of us."

And it was. As grueling as Lucius was as a teacher, Harry was enjoying every minute. Sensing Harry's enthusiasm, Lucius pushed him harder. Testing him with surprise moves and harder swings. Harry had moved up two sword levels in a week which Lucius couldn't suppress his pride over.

"Well done, Harry," said Lucius, tossing Harry a towel.

Harry caught it and summoned his sword. Practice swords were merely called swords and could be summoned easily enough, but Harry had learned that the real dueling swords, like the one he had first picked off the wall, all had their own names and to summon one you had to know its name.

"But you still disarmed me," said Harry.

"Yes but that was a master move," said Lucius. "You have a great determination to not let go."

Harry shrugged. "Stubbornness."

"No, Harry, instinct," said Lucius. "Your instincts do you credit. They are indeed good."

Harry shrugged again as he walked the length of the wall. He stopped, as he always, did at the sword he had first picked up. It always called him after that first time. It said its name was Sennie and that it would serve him. He was dying to ask Lucius about it.

"You aren't ready for that yet, Harry," said Lucius, noticing Harry's interest.

Harry sighed. "Everyone keeps telling me that," said Harry. "But this sword keeps calling me."

Lucius looked up. "Does it?"

"Yes," said Harry. There it was out.

"Odd," said Lucius as he moved to Harry. He took the sword from the wall and studied it.

"Why is that odd?" said Harry.

"This particular sword is one of many here from my collection that has been in my family for generations."

"Then why would it talk to me?"

Lucius head swung up. "It talks to you?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?" said Lucius curiously.

"It says: I am Sennie. I will serve you."

Lucius blinked and looked suspicious. "And does it call you master?"

"Er, yes," said Harry.

Lucius stared at him. "Interesting."

"What?" said Harry.

"Well," Lucius explained. "It was common ages ago for a wizard trained in the art - most usually Naturals - to imprison a snake in his sword hilt to keep the sword from being used by anyone else." Lucius point Harry's attention to the intricate web of gold that coiled around the grip of the hilt.

"Most of my swords are of Slytherin house descent but I didn't think any Entrapped Swords were left because normally the wizard would free the snake at his death.

"So there's a snake trapped in that sword," said Harry with interest.

"Apparently," said Lucius. "It would have become dormant the moment its master died, but obviously something about you woke it when you first picked it up."

Harry looked at Lucius nervously. "I'm - um - sorry," said Harry. "I didn't mean to-"

"Hm," Lucius looked back at Harry. "No need to apologize. I find it fascinating. You have discovered an Entrapped Sword in my collection, Harry. They are quite rare now and hence very valuable.

"This," Lucius handed Harry the sword and took a different one off the wall, "is the sword presented to me by my father when I was ready. It is the one I favor and it is called Maldini."

"Did it call to you?" said Harry. "You said you are a Natural."

"I would not know if it called to me, Harry," said Lucius. "I am not a Parselmouth."

"Then how do you know what to call it?" said Harry.

Lucius indicated the base of the blade, thereon written the sword's name.

Lucius laid Maldini on the table and took down a different sword. "This is the one I presented to Draco."

Harry looked at the blade. Revend was it's name. Lucius handed Harry Draco's sword. Harry took it and moved it around. Lucius took it back and offered Harry Lucius' own sword.

Harry looked at it then up at Lucius. "What-"

"Take it," said Lucius. "I'm testing the swords."

Harry took it and immediately dropped it. "It hissed at me," said Harry.

Lucius laughed, looking pleased and picked up his sword. "Thank you, Harry."

"For what?"

"You have shown me that I have two Entrapped Swords and mine does indeed keep anyone but me from using it."

"What would happen if someone who wasn't a parselmouth tried to use it?" said Harry. "Like say Draco."

"Normally the hilt would tighten around the hand until the bearer lets go. And Draco knows better than to pick up just any sword in the collection."

Harry nodded.

"Harry," said Lucius.

"Yes?"

"Would you ask the snake in my sword it's name?"

Harry looked at the hilt of Lucius' sword and asked.

*"You are not my master."*

Harry told Lucius what the sword said.

"Tell it I wish to honor it by referring to it by its proper name," said Lucius.

Harry did.

*"My master does already honor me. Maldini is my name," said the snake. "Tell my master that I belonged to the Malfoy. None but a Malfoy may touch me."*

"Whoa," said Harry with interest.

"What?" said Lucius.

Harry told him what the snake had told him and Lucius looked surprised.

"Father," said Draco as he entered. "Sorry to interrupt but the meal is about to be served."

"Very well," said Lucius. "Draco, come here."

"What is it," said Draco moving to them.

"Have you ever picked up my sword by the hilt?"

"I know better than-"

"Draco," said Lucius with a warning tone.

Draco looked at the floor. "It *is* the most beautiful sword in your collection," said Draco.

"And nothing happened?"

"Er, no, father," said Draco, looking confused.

"Show me," said Lucius.

Draco shrugged and picked up Lucius' sword. Nothing happened.

*"The boy is a Malfoy. Does the master not believe me,"* hissed Maldini.

Harry told Lucius.

"Harry is talking to your sword, father?" said Draco with surprise.

Lucius laughed. "Come," said Lucius. "I will explain later. Let us go to dinner."

They replaced all the swords to their respective places on the wall.

Due to the larger number of Death Eaters in camp, Harry chose to eat in his tent but he was still fascinated by the sword thing. He searched his library but found nothing on the subject.

Voldemort was in Slytherin, Harry considered. He might have a book.

Later, Harry moved through the camp which was very quiet to Voldemort's tent.

"Voldemort," called Harry from the entrance.

"Come in, Harry," said Voldemort. "What can I do for you?"

Harry glanced at Voldemort's bookshelves then to Voldemort, sitting behind his desk, a book open before him.

It was the first time Harry noticed that Harry's office was set up almost identically to Voldemort's.

"I was wondering if you had any books on types of fencing swords," said Harry.

"I might," said Voldemort. "You are welcome to look if you wish." He swept a hand toward the shelves.

"Thanks," said Harry as he moved to them, browsing the titles.

"Are you enjoying your lessons?" said Voldemort.

"Oh yes," said Harry. "Lucius is an excellent teacher. Did he tell you about today?"

"Of course," said Voldemort.

Harry nodded, running his fingers over the spines of books as he inspected the titles. He pulled a book off the shelf with excitement. He flipped eagerly through it. It was just what he was looking for - a reference catalogue of sorts. He turned to ask Voldemort if he could borrow it.

Voldemort was standing behind him, just outside the flinch zone.

"Of course you may borrow it, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry's gaze became locked in Voldemort's. Voldemort reached out a hand and let his fingers brush down Harry's cheek. Harry endured it, staring into Voldemort's eyes.

"You are pleased with this visit," said Voldemort, his hand still on Harry's face. "I know you are."

Harry couldn't speak.

"You are safe, contented and you have your freedom," said Voldemort. "You are happy here right now, Harry."

Voldemort glanced down briefly and picked up the medallion which lay on Harry's chest before returning his gaze to Harry's. "I knew you'd favor this one," said Voldemort.

Voldemort dropped both his hands and stepped back.

"Come in, Lucius," said Voldemort.

Harry looked to see Lucius standing just inside the entrance of the tent. Harry wondered how long he'd been standing there.

"Master," said Lucius. "You did tell me-"



Voldemort waved it off. "Yes, yes. I know. Come in. Harry just came in to borrow a book." Voldemort glanced back at Harry, then looked at Lucius. "A book on types of fencing swords I believe."

Lucius stepped further into the tent and sent Harry an understanding smile.

Harry closed the book that still lay open in his hand. "I'll see you both tomorrow," said Harry and he left.

Harry took Sennie off the wall again the next day.

*"Yes, master. I will serve you."*

"My father says you're a Natural."

Harry turned to Draco at the door of the tent.

"He says he's managed to get your level up mine after only two and a half weeks."

Draco wasn't robed and he was holding a sword. A glance at the wall showed Revend missing.

"Care to prove it, Potter?" said Draco.

"You want to spar with me," said Harry with hope.

Draco looked surprised. "Don't you want to?"

"Hell yes," said Harry. "I'd love too. I love all of this." Harry indicated the room. "And I've seen you. I know how good you are. You want to practice with me, then yes - lets."

Lucius caught them the third day they had been practicing. They had started sparring together in secret before Harry's lessons and sometimes at night, always throwing a silencing spell on the tent so they wouldn't be heard.

Harry was amazed again at the naturalness of their conversations. Draco had his own brand of sarcastic/cynical and sometimes bitter sense of humor so the banter and barbs they hurled at each other -

so much like at school - was taken more like teasing so it didn't offend or insult either of them.

That little truce in Harry's tent seemed to take root and Harry was glad.

They had talked about anything and everything. Draco talked a little bit about growing up at Malfoy Manor with governesses and house elves and Harry began to notice that some of Malfoy's arrogance was almost self-mocking. Harry started to suspect that half the time, Draco acted like spoiled arrogant bastard because he was expected too. The other half of the time, Harry suspected he acted that way because he enjoyed it, which Draco admitted to quite readily.

In turn, Harry told him about the Dursleys. When Draco laughed at Harry getting beat up every other by his cousin and friends, Harry found he couldn't get mad. Draco hadn't been laughing *at* him, but rather at how everyone, especially himself, believed that the Boy-Who-Lived lead a charmed life.

"Sort of a sick twist of fate, if you ask me," Draco had said.

Draco even admitted how much he admired that Harry argued with Voldemort. That Harry defied him and how he took everything Voldemort had thrown at him.

While that confession secretly pleased Harry greatly (such a compliment from Draco Malfoy was unheard of especially for Harry Potter), Harry accepted it with mockery.

"Careful, Malfoy," said Harry. "You're the best damned rival I've got. Can't have you going soft on me."

Draco stepped back, out of sword range, a look of feigned horror on his face. "Is that what I was doing?" said Draco aghast. "Well don't tell anyone."

Harry kept his sword poised before him. "And ruin both of us?" said Harry. "Unthinkable."

"Exactly," said Draco, raising his sword again. "What would Hogwarts do without the Malfoy/Potter enmity?"

Harry parried two of Draco's thrusts. "Fall into ruin and decay, I'd imagine," said Harry.

Draco laughed softly, attacking again. Harry parried, retreating.

"Oh, don't be a wus, Potter," said Draco. "I know what a good teacher my father is. You're holding back again."

"Your father *is* a great teacher and a master swordsman," said Harry. "But I don't have the years of experience that you do."

"True. But you have that Potter instinct," said Draco. "Come on, let's see it."

Harry wasn't going to let Draco goad him into making a mistake as he continued parrying. "Nice try, Malfoy."

He felt rather than heard Lucius approach. *Great*. How long had Lucius been watching.

"Good, Harry. Don't let him goad you," said Lucius. "Draco watch your posture."

Lucius continued to watch them captivated. Whether he was mad that they were doing this (with 'real' swords), Harry couldn't tell. Harry's eyes never left Draco.

"Hm," said Lucius. "Harry, drop your left forearm."

Harry did and something changed - more balance. Two strokes and a flick of his wrist and Draco was disarmed.

"Wow," said Draco.

Harry turned to Lucius.

"I haven't been able to watch from this vantage point before," said Lucius. "Watching you spar, I can now see the things that hinder you

both." He turned to his son. "Draco, would you like to assist now," said Lucius. "I believe it will help you improve also."

"Can I, father?" said Draco.

"Yes," said Lucius. "This little infraction," Lucius looked sternly at both of them, "Although against my better judgment has indeed been helpful."

Two days later, Lucius interrupted their practice.

"Are you boys warmed up?"

"Yes," said Draco. "Why?"

"Because the Master wants to see Harry's progress."

"But-" said Harry.

"Harry," said Lucius. "Believe me. He will be pleased."

Harry nodded and looked at Draco. Draco smiled, an endearing sort of smile.

"Ready to put on a show, Harry?"

Exactly when they had gone from Potter/Malfoy to Harry/Draco, Harry wasn't sure but he guessed they were too old and too familiar with each other now for the juvenile attitudes. When they were alone anyway.

As they took a place out in the compound, Harry heard Voldemort's voice.

"Lucius, should they be using *those* swords?"

"Just watch, my lord," said Lucius. "You will be pleased."

"Very well," said Voldemort as he settled into his chair.

Draco and Harry clashed swords with an arcing swing, hitting blades once up then once down as they had started doing as a private salute

to each other then they faced Lucius, who stood beside Voldemort's chair.

They saluted Lucius the formal way, then Voldemort then each other and took their stances.

"Don't embarrass me, Draco," said Harry in a whisper.

"As if I could," said Draco seriously.

As they began dueling, a hush came over the compound and only the clank of their blades could be heard. Death Eaters started gathering to watch and although the demonstration was for Voldemort, he didn't tell them to leave.

Every eye in camp was focused on them although all Harry saw was Draco and his flashing sword. He didn't see the fluid motion of the fencers. Harry's grace and skill, Draco's precision and perfected execution. Neither of them saw the elegance and excellence of two talented fencers in what could be called more of a dance than a duel.

Harry ducked, hearing Draco's blade sing next to his ear. He straightened staring at Draco.

"What the hell was that?" said Harry.

Draco grinned at him. "You always need a haircut, Potter," said Draco.

Harry glanced at the tuft of hair on the ground and laughed. Both were oblivious to the watching crowd.

"Show me," said Harry.

Draco moved to stand beside him and showed Harry the motion he had just used. Harry imitated it and nodded then they moved back into position.

They saluted again and started. When Harry disarmed Draco, Draco stared at him.

"Show me."

Harry summoned Draco's sword, which he could because it wasn't Entrapped and Harry knew it's name, and moved beside Draco to show him. Draco imitated his move.

"Again," said Voldemort, who was sitting straight in his chair.

Draco and Harry sparred again, and again Draco fell victim to Harry's disarming move.

Draco picked up his sword and they clashed blades again, once up, once down, then saluted formally to each other then Lucius then Voldemort.

As they approached the chair, they could hear the conversation.

"By God, Lucius," said Voldemort. "Why didn't you say?"

"I did say," said Lucius.

"You said he surpassed your expectations," said Voldemort. "Not that he was brilliant."

"Would you have believed me, master?" said Lucius. "Without seeing it. Or would you have thought I was only saying what you wanted to hear?"

"True enough, Lucius," said Voldemort and he stood up as Harry and Draco stopped before them. Voldemort's eyes touched briefly on Draco then he turned to Harry.

"Harry, my boy," said Voldemort with unmasked pride. "That was magnificent."

Harry shrugged, re-sheathing his sword. "Lucius is an outstanding teacher."

"Master Harry is an outstanding student," said Lucius.

Voldemort turned to Draco. "And you, Draco. It seems practicing with Harry has improved you as well. That was an extraordinary display."

Draco looked embarrassed but pleased. "Thank you, my lord."

Lucius looked down at both of them back in the fencing tent.

"You have both pleased the master," said Lucius. "But you have both pleased me more knowing that I have given you what I have just seen and it was extraordinary to watch.

"And as I presented Draco with his sword," said Lucius as he turned to pick up the sword Harry had been using off the table where Harry had laid it. "I present this sword to my second protégé."

Harry, stunned, just stared.

"Take it, Harry," said Lucius. "You have done me proud."

Astonished green eyes met gray that looked on him oddly different now.

"But-"

"Take it, Harry," said Lucius again. "It has chosen you anyway. No one else will be able to use it now. And besides, you will need it to continue to practice when you go back to school on Monday." He looked pointedly at Draco. "I'm sure you will find a location."

"Yes, Father," said Draco.

Harry slowly took the sword. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy."

"It's Lucius," Lucius corrected. "And no, Harry. Thank *you* for making it a pleasure."

## Chapter 11

### The Test of the Master

The return to Hogwarts was the return to boredom with the exception of Harry's secret practice sessions with Draco. Harry couldn't tell Ron or Hermione of his new skill although he desperately wanted to. (Hermione had admitted that she already knew Harry had some sort of agreement with Voldemort - "Honestly, it was so obvious. Even Ron figured it out.") But then he would have to tell them about his truce with Malfoy, which didn't extend outside their sparring.

And although he had brought some of his new clothes with him, he couldn't wear them. Not only because the school already set him apart and he didn't want to draw even more attention to himself but because such a show of wealth was not something that would go over big with Ron.

Draco said he was being pathetic and maybe he was, but Harry still refused to wear them, although he did still wear the medallion. He kept it under his shirt and he wasn't sure why but he couldn't bring himself to take it off.

Ginger was the only one who seemed to know something was going on. She finally cracked him open when she followed him out the portrait one night wearing his sword.

He told her everything except how close he was starting to get to Draco and she promised she wouldn't tell anyone although she did tell him what an idiot he was for hiding it. Sometimes he felt like an idiot.

Even now, as he sat on the floor of the room where he and Draco had been practicing. Draco had found the room two weeks ago. The tower faced south and the moon gave them enough light to practice which they had been doing every other night.

He leaned against the wall, idly toying with the chain around his neck. Voldemort had called him earlier and Harry had secretly slipped away - right away to see what he wanted.



"Are we going to practice or are you going to sit there and brood?" said Draco.

"I can brood if I want to," muttered Harry. "I'm the one who has to deal with him."

"So why did he call you this time?"

"Something about a party on Saturday," said Harry, again feeling relieved he had Draco to talk to about Voldemort. He looked up at Draco, who was leaning against a table arms crossed, staring at Harry with an inscrutable look. "Are you going?"

Draco let out a bitter laugh. "Harry, you know I don't have the distinct pleasure of saying no to or arguing with the master."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"That's your job," said Draco.

Harry looked at him again. Draco grinned. Harry grinned back faintly.

"Far be it for me to deprive such an exalted presence of the mental stimulation."

Draco laughed.

"So what's the party for," said Harry.

"Who knows," said Draco. "He doesn't need a reason to celebrate."

"I got the impression there was a reason."

"Did you ask him?" said Draco.

"No," said Harry. "I already had a headache."

Draco sighed and moved to the cleared off section where they practiced. "So are you going to go?" said Draco, removing his sheath.

"I said I would."

"Why?"

Harry pushed to his feet, leaning against the wall. "I don't know," said Harry thoughtfully.

"Well make sure you show up or he's liable to throw a fit."

Harry looked over at Draco who now looked out a window.

"Voldemort doesn't need an excuse to throw a fit," said Harry.

Draco turned to face him with a laugh. "Maybe not," said Draco. "But you know he's particularly touchy where you're concerned."

Harry sighed. "Yeah a lot of people seem to be particularly touchy where I'm concerned," said Harry. "It's like this grand conspiracy to get me to do what I ultimately have to do."

"Which, of course, you have no idea what it is," said Draco.

Harry shrugged out of his robe. "Actually I have a pretty good idea."

"Oh?" said Draco with interest.

"Believe me, Draco," said Harry. "You do not want to know."

Draco stared back at with a penetrating stare. "You know you'll eventually tell me," said Draco.

"Probably," muttered Harry.

"Well shake it off and come on," said Draco. "We only have so much time and this always cheers you up."

"I know," said Harry, drawing his sword and tossing the sheath on the table.

"So stop being Harry Potter for an hour and get your butt up here and fight me," said Draco. "Would it help if I called you Taylor?"

Harry snorted as he stepped before Draco and they clashed blades, one up one down.

"You're a riot, Draco," said Harry.

They saluted formally and took their stances. As soon as Draco attacked, Harry's troubles melted away, just like taking off on his Firebolt. Fencing and flying, Lucius had said, and it was the same for Harry.

"Yes, well that's definitely an option now," said Harry.

Draco retreated a step, blocking several of Harry's blows.

"Oh," said Draco. "How's that?"

"He bought me an estate in Bulgaria."

Draco brought his sword up, stopping the duel, the swords locked over their heads.

"You're kidding," said Draco, his eyes flickering with humor.

Harry grinned. "Why would I lie when-"

"The truth is so much more satisfying," finished Draco.

They clashed swords then saluted formally again. Draco was still chuckling and shaking his head.

"That is too funny," said Draco, pressing several proficient blows.

"Tell me about it," said Harry, matching blow for blow.

"Quidditch and fencing, eh, Taylor," said Draco. "When do we leave?"

Harry laughed and it was the distraction Draco needed.

Harry ducked, raising his sword but he felt another tuft of hair fall off his head.

Draco laughed. "Still can't counter that move, can you Harry?"

Harry shook his head, smiling. "Typical Slytherin tactic," said Harry. "The least you could do, is cut the other side and keep it even."

Draco chuckled, clanking his sword with Harry's. "Bitch, bitch, bitch," said Draco.

They started again in earnest. Ten minutes became fifteen and Harry got him.

Harry summoned Draco's thrown sword and tossed it back. "Still can't counter that, can you, Draco?" said Harry with a grin.

"You're a riot, Harry," said Draco.

With another clash of blades, up and down, they started again. Then Harry felt something.

"Stop," whispered Harry.

"What?"

Harry looked around the dark room. The moon was behind them throwing the rest of the room in total darkness.

"We're being watched," whispered Harry.

They both turned their swords to the room.

"Who's there?" said Draco.

A cleared throat, a shuffled foot and Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape stepped into the light.

Both Draco and Harry groaned with a frustrated gesture.

Great, thought Harry. Just how much did they hear?

"Pure poetry," sighed McGonagall. "If Jacob was here, he'd be crying."

"Indeed," said Snape.

"Gentlemen," said Dumbledore. "How long has this been going on?"

"Almost two weeks," said Harry, looking at the floor. "Sorry, Professor."

"Sorry?" said Dumbledore. "Harry, Draco, do you know how I've wanted to restart fencing classes? How you've now given me the opportunity?"

Harry shared a maybe we're not in trouble glance with Draco.

"I daresay, a demonstration," said Snape. "One of this caliber..."

"Precisely, Severus," said Dumbledore. "It is apparent that you've both been instructed by a master." Holding up his hands, he added, "Now I don't want to know the whos or the whyfores or why you've both become so naturally at ease with each other, but the fact is that you are both very skilled in this ancient art.

"This skill used to be an elective here and ended - oh, just after your father left, Draco," said Dumbledore. "He was quite a master. But alas, interest dropped off and we had to stop offering the classes.

"Needless to say, to show the students the skill-"

"The beauty," inserted McGonagall.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "Of the skill might spark an interest in learning the lost art of fencing."

"What are you saying, Professor?" said Harry.

"What I am saying, my boys," said Dumbledore. "Is that Professor Billings, who used to teach fencing and quite well - he did teach Lucius Malfoy - is still here. He would undoubtedly be thrilled to be able to teach it again if there was interest and enrollment."

"Meaning," said Draco.

"Meaning," said Dumbledore. "That a demonstration such as what we have just seen could generate just that enrollment."

"You want us to spar?" said Harry.

"In front of the school?" said Draco.

"Yes, gentlemen," said Dumbledore.

"I think we should just give them detention for being out of their common rooms after hours and be done with it," said Snape.

"Now Severus," said Dumbledore. "I think the boys will realize it's for the good of the school."

Harry shared a look of this is blackmail with Draco.

"I will if he will," muttered Harry.

"And miss the opportunity to show off," said Draco. "Never let it be said."

Harry heard Draco's arrogant words but noticed they didn't reflect in his eyes. He wasn't comfortable with it either.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "It will be tomorrow after dinner. Can't hold off on some things. Come, we will let the boys finish up." A glance at them. "Ten minutes, gentlemen and you will be back in your dorms."

"Yes, sir," they both echoed and the teachers left.

Harry sank to a seat on the floor.

"What a nightmare," said Harry.

Draco nudged him with a leg. "Oh, knock it off," said Draco. "We just put on another show, like we did for the Dark Lord. Beats detention."

"You're right," said Harry with a sigh. "But I hate getting suckered into stuff like that."

"I do too, but guess what," said Draco.

"I know, I know," said Harry. "We agreed."

Draco grinned. "So get up. We have five minutes to fence and five to get to our common rooms."

Harry jumped up. They saluted once up, once down then the proper way then stared at each other.

"Oh and Harry."

"What?" said Harry.

Draco looked with disgust at Harry's baggy sweater and the hole in the knee of his jeans. "Dress for it," said Draco.

"What?" said Harry.

"You're not stupid, Harry," said Draco. "Dress for it - effect."

Harry brought his sword up as Draco lunged. Draco has a flair for dressing to impress. "Ok," said Harry. "I get it."

Harry went down to dinner feeling nauseous. Under his robes, he wore a white silk shirt and black trousers and his sword.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him from entering the hall.

"Ready to put on a show, Potter?" said Draco.

Harry masked his nervousness and turned his head to him. "I am if you are."

Draco frowned at him. "Get over it, Potter," said Draco. "My father taught you well."

Harry dropped his gaze. "I know."

Draco squeezed his shoulder and Harry looked up. Draco looked hard into his face. "This is just another practice session."

"Easy for you to say," mumbled Harry.

Draco opened his mouth then closed it. "You really do hate it don't you?" said Draco.

Harry pulled away but Draco stopped him.

"Admit it," said Draco. "You hate it."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Harry.

Draco looked like he wanted to laugh but couldn't. Harry pulled his arm out of Draco's grip.

"Let's just get this over with," said Harry. He turned away and saw Ron and the girls. He took a step toward them.

"Harry," said Draco in a whisper and Harry stopped without turning around. "Enjoy it while you can, damn it."

Harry started walking again.

He sat down to dinner next to Ron, careful to keep his sword concealed. Dumbledore was finishing up the announcements.

"Lastly," said Dumbledore. "After the meal-"

Harry felt nauseous again.

"There will be a demonstration of the art of fencing."

Several murmurs went around the room as well as a very surprised gasp from Professor Jacob Billings.

"Headmaster," said Professor Billings with surprise.

"Easy, Jacob," said Dumbledore. "It's a surprise."

Beside Harry, Ron sounded excited.

"Cool," said Ron. "I've heard there are only like five Acknowledged Masters in the world."

"Yes," Hermione chimed in. "I read about the art. There are all sorts of rules and codes of honor and stuff."

Harry felt himself shrinking.



"With this demonstration," Dumbledore went on, "We wish to instill an interest within you students to learn the ancient art and therefore be able to offer classes again here at Hogwarts if Professor Billings wishes to teach it."

Professor Billings nearly squealed with delight.

"You must realize, however," said Dumbledore. "That these two fencers are highly skilled and it takes more than a meager few weeks to aspire to this level."

Harry looked across the room to the Slytherin table and saw Draco staring back. When he met Harry's gaze, he burst out laughing. Harry quickly looked away.

"So please remain in your seats when you finish your meal," said Dumbledore. "It will be an enjoyable exhibition. Let the feast begin."

Food appeared before them and Harry nearly got full blown sick. He moved a lot of food around on his plate but none of it reached his mouth as he listened to the conversation around him.

Speculation on who the fencers were and how talented they really were in the art flew around the table. Others wondered if they were students at Hogwarts or if they had been brought in from the community. Someone even suggested that it might be a couple of the teachers but Hermione shot that one down.

"If it were teachers," argued Hermione. "Then Professor Billings would have known now, right."

And as always, when you're dreading something it comes too fast. Harry almost groaned out loud as Dumbledore stood up and cleared the dinner mess. No one had left the Great Hall either.

Dumbledore magicked a wide, high table as long as the front of the hall in front of the staff table and instructed people in the back to come down the side isles to see better.

"Now then," said Dumbledore. "On to it, before Professor Billings perishes of anticipation."

The students laughed and Dumbledore turned to the Slytherin table.

"Mr. Malfoy," said Dumbledore.

Draco stood up and the Slytherins went nuts with cheers. Draco took off his robe and laid it on his seat and moved toward the front of the room.

"Bloody hell," muttered Ron. "Malfoy. Figures."

Dumbledore turned to the Gryffindor table. "Mr. Potter."

Gryffindor eyes turned to Harry as he stood up.

"Harry?" said Ron.

"I'll explain later," said Harry, as he took off his robe.

More eyes fell to the sword belted around his hips and the table erupted with cheers.

Ron looked at his sword then up at Harry. "Kick his Slytherin arse," said Ron with a grin.

Harry threw his robe on Ron but couldn't help his grin as he went forward to the table.

They both climbed onto the table at their respected ends and pulled off their sheaths. Gripping the swords, they dropped the sheaths onto the table and walked toward each other.

Harry's eyes were locked in Draco's, although he had had seen Draco grin with approval at Harry's choice of dress. Draco himself was all in black silk, a startling contrast for his coloring and Harry had to admire his flair. Draco did know how to dress for effect.

They met in the middle of the table and turned to face Dumbledore.

"I believe you boys know what to do," said Dumbledore, his eyes glittering.

Harry and Draco nodded.

"Let the room blur," whispered Draco. "Focus on me. Remember, this is fun."

Harry nodded again and they saluted Dumbledore. Harry turned to Draco and they automatically clanked swords, once up once down. Then they backed away a step and saluted each other formally.

Draco put forth the visage of his malicious grin even though Harry could see the humor in his eyes.

"Scared, Potter?" said Draco in a tone meant to be menacing as he raised his sword.

Harry raised his own sword, taking his stance. Show time!

"You wish," said Harry and he attacked.

He must have surprised Draco with the force of his attack because Draco retreated. Harry pressed on, the only noise in the crowded room was the clanking of their swords.

Draco continued to retreat blocking all the way to his end of the table. He blocked again and held Harry's sword above their heads as he teetered at the end of the table.

With a grin, Harry reached out his free hand and grabbed the front of Draco's shirt and pulled him to a steady stand on the table. He clanked blades with Draco's again one up and one down then turned and walked back toward the center of the table.

As he expected, Draco waited a minute then charged.

Harry heard Ron yell out a warning but he kept walking until...

He swung around and blocked Draco's swing. There was a chorus of gasps at how Harry had just made the block in time.

The swords were again held firm between them.

"You know better than to turn your back on me, Potter," sneered Draco but his eyes were still laughing. He inclined his head as if to say nice move.

Harry pushed him back. "Indeed," said Harry, but couldn't help his grin.

They saluted again and started. This time it was more like their normal practice sessions as they moved up and down the table. Harry could hear some excited whispering from the staff table but he didn't move his gaze from Draco.

Once again their swords locked. Almost nose to nose they stood, the swords over their heads.

"So now what?" whispered Harry.

"Well since you almost pushed me off the table," whispered Draco. "I think you need a hair cut."

They both shoved firmly away from each other.

"Go for it," said Harry.

They went at it again and a couple minutes later, Draco found his opening and Harry ducked, bringing his sword up to knock Draco's away. But Draco had hit his mark and a tuft of Harry's hair went flying.

Harry almost laughed but repressed it as he touched his ear. Draco had gone for the other side, which Harry hadn't expected.

Draco frowned as he looked at Harry's fingers. Harry wiped the blood off on his pants and saluted. Draco returned it and they began again.

Harry saw his opening and as Draco jumped back, it was a perfectly controlled swing that purposely slashed through the front of Draco's shirt.

Draco looked down at his shirt and reached down to pull open the rip.

"You owe me a new shirt, Potter," said Draco but he was starting to lose his sneer.

"Bitch, Bitch, Bitch," muttered Harry and he saw Draco turn from the hall to snort.

"Er, boys," said Dumbledore and when they looked at him he said, "let's not get carried away."

They both smiled at him to convey they knew what they were doing.

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "Go on then."

They saluted Dumbledore then each other.

As enjoyable as they both found it, the exchange had gone on longer than their usual sessions and they were both tiring. Sweat had formed on their brows.

Draco locked his sword with Harry's.

"Finish it, Harry," whispered Draco.

Harry nodded and pushed him away. They clanked swords then saluted.

It took a few minutes but Harry found the right swing and with a twist of the sword, Draco's sword went flying straight up as Harry moved the tip of his blade to Draco's throat.

Before Dumbledore could interfere, Harry held out his left hand and summoned Revend. Draco took a step back and Harry tossed him his sword by the hilt. They clanked swords again, then saluted each other then Dumbledore.

Dumbledore stood up smiling. "Excellent, gentlemen. Excellent," said Dumbledore as he began to applaud. The staff table joined him and Harry and Draco turned to the Hall where their schoolmates stared back with awe.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco raise his sword. Harry instantly raised his own and they slashed the blades down at the same time, saluting the Hall, which promptly erupted into cheers.

Harry summoned his sheath and turned to Draco.

"You're bleeding," said Draco softly.

"It's nothing," said Harry, re-sheathing his sword.

"It's running down your face."

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry with a grin. "And I owe you a new shirt."

Draco choked on his laugh as he tried to conceal it.

"Good show," said Draco.

"Thanks," said Harry, strapping on his sword. Then he looked at Draco, meeting his gaze. "I mean it. Thanks."

"Draco, Harry," called Dumbledore.

They jumped off the table and went to stand before him at the staff table, each re-strapping the swords around them. Dumbledore handed them both a towel.

"All right, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Hm, what?" said Harry. "Oh, it's nothing."

Professor Billings was almost jumping up and down.

"How could you not tell me, Albus," said Billings. "That was incredible. Draco, of course, well considering his father, his timing and execution is perfect. But," he turned to Harry, "But you. How marvelous to see a performance from a Natural."

Harry looked at the floor. He heard Draco chuckle beside him.

"Yeah, he's not bad for four weeks of training," said Draco.

"Four weeks?" said Billings incredulously. "You're joking."

"Why would I lie-"

Harry elbowed Draco in the ribs to shut him up.

"Well, it's possible," considered Billings. "For a Natural and especially considering Mr. Potter's power." He turned to Dumbledore. "Can I test them? I'm sure I can get an Acknowledged Master here once they hear I've got my hands on a Natural."

Harry felt sick again. He glanced at Draco who looked like he was enjoying Harry's discomfort and having a silent laugh at Harry's expense.

"That is up to the boys," said Dumbledore. "I would not presume to force them to do anything they aren't comfortable with."

Billings looked at them, delight and hope pouring out of his expression. "What do you say, gentlemen?"

"I will, if he will."

Harry heard the amusement in Draco's voice and glared at him. Draco just grinned maddeningly back.

Great. A dare. Harry sighed. More tests.

"All right," said Harry.

Billings did jump up and down then. "Wonderful, wonderful," said Billings. "I will owl Terrance Vandewater immediately."

Draco's head swung up. "Vandewater?" said Draco. "You think he will come."

Harry watched Draco's expression with interest. He seemed suddenly overly pleased.

"Oh, yes," said Billings. "He will be especially interested in my having fencers again. He never thought I was much of a teacher and now he thinks he is the best instructor there is. When he see you and, well -

Harry." He sent a conspiratorial grin to both of them. "Of course I won't mention any names."

Draco laughed and Harry looked at him curiously.

As Dumbledore was instructing the school how to express any interest in learning the art, Harry leaned toward Draco.

"I'll get you for that, Malfoy."

Draco looked at him with surprise. "Are you kidding?" said Draco. "We may be tested by Terrance Vandewater, an Acknowledged Fencing Master and my father's nemesis."

"Your fathers nemesis?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Draco. "My father despises him. Partially because he could never disarm him but mostly because Vandewater never let him live it down. You heard Billings. He's an arrogant, self-obsessed prat."

Harry blinked at Draco's unflattering depiction.

"Once he gets a load of you, well..." said Draco.

"Well, what?"

Draco leaned closer to Harry. "You really want to thank my father for teaching you," said Draco. "You beat Vandewater then casually drop that Lucius Malfoy taught you. How sweet would that be?"

Harry considered Draco. If Vandewater was indeed such an bastard, Harry guessed he could try.

"All right, Draco," said Harry. "I'm with you but we'll need to practice - hard."

Draco nodded and smiled, a true smile of gratitude. "Thanks, Harry," said Draco. "Now go and get cleaned up, Potter. You're still bleeding like a stuck pig."



Harry snorted and they both moved toward their respected tables. Most of the students had begun leaving, all muttering with excitement. Most of the Gryffindors were waiting as Harry approached the table.

"Harry, that was awesome," said Ron.

Several others echoed the same appreciation as Harry picked up his robe.

"Thanks," muttered Harry. He still had the towel pressed to his ear. "Come on, Ron. I've got to get cleaned up."

Ron and Hermione fell into step beside him and Harry looked around.

"Where's Ginger?"

"Um. I think she's mad at you," said Hermione hesitantly.

*Great.* "But I told her," said Harry with confusion as they walked through the school.

"Maybe," said Hermione. "But not how good you were. Really, Harry. It was - well - beautiful. I read that watching skilled fencers could be mesmerizing but that was - I mean - it was astonishing."

Harry couldn't recall ever hearing Hermione stammering like that.

"How come you didn't tell us you could do that?" said Ron.

"Lucius only taught me over the Christmas break," said Harry. "I didn't want - Well, you two know me. That's why I made Ginger promise not to tell anyone."

"We know how you hate the spotlight," said Hermione. "But you know we can keep a secret."

"I know," said Harry. "I'm sorry. Ginger said I was being an idiot too. I just thought that you'd be pissed because the only one I can practice with is Malfoy."

"Ahh," said Ron with dawning.

"Well it was obvious to me that you're better than him," said Hermione.

Harry looked at the red stained towel. "He's not bleeding like a stuck pig, is he?" said Harry.

"Exactly," said Hermione.

Ron made an exasperated noise.

"You have more control," said Hermione. "You deliberately slashed his shirt but you didn't cut him. It was a controlled swing."

"You saw that," said Harry with surprise.

"Oh, yes," said Hermione. "I read all about fencing."

"What a surprise," said Ron.

"And you're obviously a Natural."

"I'm starting to get sick of that word," muttered Harry.

Ron laughed.

"And now Billings is calling in an Acknowledged Master to test us," said Harry.

"Really," said Hermione with excitement. "Which one?"

"Vandewater," said Harry.

"I'll look him up, if you want me too."

"Would you, Hermione?" said Harry. "That'd be great."

"Sure, Harry," said Hermione. "It's just so incredible. And you look great, by the way. Where did you get those clothes?"

Harry sighed. He was dreading this part.

"You didn't borrow them from Malfoy, did you?" said Ron. He reached out and picked up the medallion that laid on Harry's chest.

Harry knocked his hand away and put the chain back under his shirt.

"I have some nice things," said Harry trying to sound indignant. He ruined it by adding, too bitterly, "Besides, Voldemort doesn't like me dressing like a peasant at the compound and I'd rather not argue with him over such a stupid point."

Ron didn't appear half as annoyed or jealous as Harry had thought he would.

"I think you should dress like that all the time," said Hermione. "You can afford it."

Harry started to glare at her, but Ron stopped him.

"I doubt Harry wants to waste all his money on clothes, Hermione," said Ron then he turned to Harry. "But she's right, you look good."

Harry finally just shrugged.

"Harry," said Ron.

"What?"

"Do you like-" said Ron. "I mean, it looked like-"

"Spit it out Ron," said Harry.

"Well, it looked like you enjoyed dueling with Malfoy," said Ron.

Crunch time. Harry stopped at the bottom of a staircase and looked at his best friend.

"Ron," said Harry. "Ever since I came to Hogwarts, there's only been one thing that I could do without thinking."

"Fly," said Hermione.

Harry glanced at her. "Right and the minute I saw Lucius and Draco fencing I knew I wanted to do it."

"Voldemort arranged it," said Ron. "Didn't he?"

"Yes," said Harry. "And I do indeed love it. Just like flying. The minute I pick up my sword, everything else goes away. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," said Ron with a nod. "It's an escape."

Harry continued up the stairs, Ron and Hermione with him. "Call it whatever you want," said Harry. "But it's therapeutic too. I think that's why Voldemort showed it to me, damned manipulative bastard that he is. But I'm hooked now. And I'm lucky to have someone as skilled as Malfoy to practice with. I think he knows I need it too."

"The weight of the world and everything," said Ron trying his best to insert some levity into the conversation.

Harry sent him a grateful smile. "Right," said Harry. "And even you can acknowledge that hacking away at Malfoy with a four foot sword can be rather satisfying."

Ron laughed. "Now there's a point I hadn't considered."

That night after constant harassment, Harry consented to let Ron and Hermione come with him for practice, swearing them to secrecy about the room he and Draco used.

Harry hadn't seen Ginger that evening and couldn't talk to her about why she was mad, but he'd get to that. Ginger never stayed mad at him for long.

As they entered the room, Harry found Draco leaning on the wall. He straightened when he saw Ron and Hermione.

"You brought them," said Draco with his customary sneer.

Harry sighed as he slipped out of his robe. "You can drop the contempt, Draco," said Harry. "They understand that I need this." He

looked pointedly at Draco. "And I knew you wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to show off."

Draco's sneer melted off his face. "Never let it be said."

"Exactly," said Harry, un-strapping his sheath. Then he noticed Pansy Parkinson sitting on a table across the room.

He looked at her then turned to Draco with a raised brow.

"Great minds think alike I guess," said Draco.

"Oh," said Harry, stepping up the one step to the floor in front of Draco. "Or did she beg you until you couldn't stand it anymore too?"

Draco laughed and, with a sweep of his arm, met Harry's swing once up, once down.

"Right in one, Harry," said Draco. He appraised Harry with a glance. "Back to the peasant look?"

Harry sent him a pleading look, which Draco smirked at.

Ron and Hermione got comfortable on a table. Hermione had a book in her lap.

"I found some information on Terrance Vandewater," said Hermione.

Draco sent her a glance. "Always on top of things, eh, Granger."

"Of course," said Ron in her defense. "She-"

"Don't get all offended, Weasley," said Draco. "I didn't mean it as an insult."

"Well considering that anything that comes out of your mouth is usually an insult," said Ron. "You'll understand my mistake."

Draco actually laughed and turned to Harry. "Your sidekicks are more amusing than mine."

Harry grinned at him as they saluted and took a stance. "That's because to be amusing, one must have a brain."

They exchanged several blows and Draco locked Harry's sword in the air.

"Are you insinuating that Crabbe and Goyle are brainless?" said Draco.

"Never let it be said," said Harry.

Ron snorted.

They saluted again.

"Anyway," said Draco. "What I meant to say was that Granger can get all sorts of statistics from that book but nothing substantial on the man's character."

Harry nodded, retreating as Draco attacked.

"But aren't your opinions a little jaded by your father's feelings?" said Harry.

Draco shrugged, blocking now. "Maybe," said Draco. "But most of it is based on first hand knowledge. I've met him. I've seen the way he deals with people."

They continued dueling a few minutes in silence until Harry disarmed Draco.

Both Ron and Hermione shrieked as they dove off the table to avoid Draco's sword.

"Ha!" said Draco. "You missed them."

Harry sent him a grin and summoned Revend. Tossing it back to Draco, he said, "Funny, Draco."

With an arc, one up, one down, Draco chuckled. "I thought it was."

"So tell us what to expect," said Hermione as she and Ron got back on the table.

Draco looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, for starters, he considers everyone who can't disarm him as least once to be beneath him."

"I read that only three people have beaten him and they were all fellow Acknowledged Masters," said Hermione.

"Yes," said Draco. "So you see that makes him loftier than most of the world. If you don't know how to fence or can't appreciate the art then you're not worth his notice."

"Sounds like a Malf-"

Hermione slapped a palm over Ron's mouth.

"A malevolent bastard," said Hermione swiftly.

"Exactly," said Draco.

Harry wasn't sure if Draco had heard and chose to ignore the remark or if he was simply too engrossed in the duel to notice. Either way, Harry decided not to comment.

"Is he a Natural?" Hermione continued her investigation. "It doesn't mention it in the book."

"That I don't know," said Draco. "My father is hailed one but I'm not. Obviously, Harry is one too." Draco stepped back out of sword range, stopping the swordplay. "My father could never beat Vandewater," Draco went on thoughtfully. "Not to say he didn't try. But my father says that Vandewater has the ability to tap his internal magic to augment his instinct and that's what makes him so tough."

"You think you can beat him, Draco?" said Pansy, speaking for the first time.

Draco looked over at her. "Don't be ridiculous," Draco scoffed. "I don't have a chance in hell of beating him, but," he turned to Harry. "I'm betting that Harry can."

"Oh?" said Ron with a glimmer of pride. "Why?"

"Because Harry's instinct is nearly flawless," said Draco, arcing his sword. Harry instantly reacted, clanking their blades one up one down. "See," said Draco. "Harry doesn't need to think. I believe he is already subconsciously tapping his internal magic."

"And with Harry's magic being so powerful..." Hermione trailed off suggestively.

Draco nodded at her. "She catches on fast," Draco said to Harry.

"Always," said Harry.

"So you want to use Harry to avenge your father," said Ron with annoyance.

Draco looked seriously affronted.

Harry laughed and arced his sword. Draco responded, clashing the blades.

"That's it in a nutshell," said Harry.

"You think I'm using you?" said Draco looking hurt.

"Aren't you?" said Harry with a grin.

Draco's mouth dropped open.

"Just as I accidentally let it slip out in front of Voldemort that I wanted to learn."

Harry raised his brow at Draco. Draco closed his mouth, staring hard at Harry.

Harry smiled.



Draco laughed. "OK, so it's a conspiracy all around then."

"Exactly," said Harry. Not that Harry had done it on purpose but Draco didn't have to know that. "So can we practice now?"

In response, Draco saluted formally. Harry returned it.

"By the way," said Harry.

"What?"

"Did you tell your father Vandewater was called?"

"Are you nuts?" said Draco. "If this doesn't work..." he trailed off.

"Understood," said Harry.

They started practicing daily now and the staff let them. Sometimes Ron and Hermione or Pansy would come. Ginger, who did forgive Harry, even if she still grumbled about how stupid it was to keep it a secret, only came once that week. While she was surprised at Harry's changed relationship with Draco, she didn't understand why they bothered with the animosity outside the room. And she didn't buy their excuse that the school would fall into decay without the Potter/Malfoy enmity.

Harry preferred when they practiced alone. The banter was freer as were the references that only he and Draco understood. Draco seemed to feel the same way because he looked pleased every time he came into the room and found only Harry.

On this particular night, half way through the session Draco stepped back in the middle of an exchange.

"What?" said Harry.

"You did it," said Draco with surprise.

"What?" said Harry. "What did I do?"

Draco smiled at him. "Well you didn't get a hair cut."

"You did that move?"

"Yes," said Draco. "Didn't you see it?"

"Um."

Draco laughed. "Harry, your instincts took over. This is going to work."

Harry grinned and clanked his sword to Draco's. "I hope so," said Harry.

Five minutes later the door opened and Harry and Draco stopped fencing as Dumbledore and Billings came in.

"Why do you practice in private?" said Billings with wonder. "The whole world should be able to see you."

Harry muttered under his breath about what he thought about that sentiment and he heard Draco snort.

"In deference to Harry's modesty, Professor," said Draco. "We practice without the prying eyes of the world."

Harry heard Draco's amusement and elbowed him.

"Is there something..." said Harry.

"Yes, boys," said Dumbledore. "We heard from Master Vandewater."

"And," said Draco with almost breathless hope.

"He'll be here at the end of the week," said Billings.

Harry heard Draco's almost silent "YES!" and had to smile. It was incredibly strange to be involved in a plot with Draco Malfoy rather than against him. What made it stranger was that Ron and Hermione were in on it too and they both wanted the plot to succeed too.

"Testing is to start after lunch on Saturday in the Great Hall," said Billings.

No! Not in front of the whole school. Terror slowly gripped Harry. He groaned

And leaned against the wall.

"Professor," said Draco quickly with a glance at Harry. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry looked up at him. "I know you hate it but Terrence Vandewater loves it. Acknowledged Master Vandewater always performs with an audience."

Dumbledore and Billings left and Harry sank to a seat on the floor, still leaning on the wall.

"I'm sorry, Draco," said Harry.

"Come on, Harry," said Draco. "You can do it."

Harry opened his eyes as Draco squatted next to him. "The whole school?" said Harry with distress. Suddenly a memory of a Hungarian Horntail breathing fire at him in front of hundreds of people popped into his mind.

Draco forced a smile. "How sweet would that be?" said Draco. "And we fenced in front of the school before."

"Yes, but I could focus on you," said Harry. "You know how to direct my thoughts."

"It's not me, Harry," said Draco with a frown. "Once you get your focus, everything but the sword goes away."

Harry sighed. "I hope you're right."

Saturday at noon both Harry and Draco entered the great hall, this time together. Mr. "fashion sense" had reminded Harry to dress for it again, so Harry had chosen all black (as he was convinced he was doomed). The shirt was labeled satin and the pants were a crushed type of fiber. Draco was wearing white, which gave him sort of a spirit world type aura.

"Well guess if we're going to die, we may as well look the part," Harry said.

Draco only snorted and made a sarcastic comment about Harry's cynicism. But then promptly reminded Harry that Harry owed him a new black shirt and eyed the one Harry was presently wearing as if that one would do nicely.

The exchange sufficiently lightened Harry's mood so he was grinning as they moved into the hall. It erupted into cheers.

Harry scanned the staff table. Dumbledore and Billings weren't there, nor was the infamous Master Vandewater but Harry's heart leapt in his chest as he saw Sirius. Draco grabbed his arm to keep him from flinging himself at his godfather.

"Do him proud," said Draco softly.

Harry nodded and Sirius smiled at him as they moved toward the table set up once again in the front of the great hall.

Severus Snape stood up. "The headmaster and company will join us momentarily," said Snape and he gestured at the table. "You are welcome to warm up."

"Yes. Come on, Harry," shouted Seamus. "Give us another show."

Harry grimaced.

"Ah, our public," said Draco.

Harry choked and Draco laughed at him.

"You can be so pathetic, Potter. You know that," said Draco.

"Story of my life."

Draco waved dramatically at the table. "Fame before beauty."

Harry laughed. "You're a riot, Malfoy," said Harry.

It only took Harry three minutes before Harry disarmed Draco the first time.

"Good," said Draco. "Be aggressive."

Harry disarmed Draco again three times again in the span of ten minutes. The Gryffindor table was going nuts but Draco was smiling. Only Ron, Hermione and Pansy (if she had bothered to pay attention) knew why. Ginger knew as well but she was dubious of the whole thing and refused to condone the conspiracy.

After the forth time, a voice rose from the doors.

"So you weren't lying, Billings," said the man. "You do have a Natural."

Draco and Harry turned to the door as the three men entered. Vandewater was not what Harry had expected. He was maybe a year or so older than Lucius but much leaner in stature - softer looking, pretty even.

No wonder Lucius didn't like him. It would be like being beaten by a girl.

Vandewater crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed the two boys as if reserving judgment until after he had squashed them both under his boot.

"You boy," said Vandewater, pointing at Harry. "What is your name?"

Harry heard Draco's sigh of relief. Harry had managed to get his hair to behave and cover his scar and without the glasses, obviously the man didn't know who Harry was.

"Harry, sir," said Harry trying to sound intimidated.

"Very well," said Vandewater. "I'll deal with you in a minute. You," he pointed at Draco, "You aren't a Malfoy, are you?"

Draco's chin shot up. "I am."

Vandewater laughed with delight.

"Let it bounce off," whispered Harry.

Draco nodded.

"I will see them spar again before I test them myself."

The three took seats at the staff table.

"What do we do?" said Harry.

"What? Salute order?" said Draco. Harry nodded. "Most important person in the room last. As this is a fencing event, first Dumbledore then Vandewater then each other."

"What if your father was here?" said Harry.

Draco smirked. "Unfortunately, Vandewater is still an Acknowledged Master. It would be Dumbledore, my father then him."

Harry shook his head, grinning.

Draco saw the grin. "Are you going to be insulting, Harry?"

"Maybe," said Harry.

Draco fought his laugh and they clashed blades, once up once down.

Turning to the staff table, they saluted Dumbledore then Vandewater and Draco turned to Harry but Harry turned to face Sirius. He saluted his godfather formally and turned to Draco, not looking to see what Vandewater had thought of the action.

Draco looked as if he wanted to burst out laughing.

"Most important person in the room last, right," said Harry with a grin.

They saluted and after a few minutes of sparring, they heard a heavy sigh.

"Unsatisfactory," said Vandewater. "Forget sparring - duel."

The intensity of the exchange instantly altered as Harry attacked. Draco retreated looking surprised at how fast Harry had made the transition from sparring to dueling.

"Ah, better," said Vandewater.

They were almost at the end of the table when Draco's sword went flying.

The Gryffindor table exploded with cheers.

Dumbledore quieted the room and Vandewater stood up.

"So you're a Gryffindor, are you, Natural?" said Vandewater.

Since it seemed like Vandewater had forgotten Harry's name already, Harry just nodded. "Yes," he said simply.

"Too bad," muttered Vandewater as he came around the staff table. "Well come down now and I will deal with young Malfoy there."

Harry summoned Draco's sword for him and handed it back. He gave him a meaningful look then jumped off the table. Moving to stand beside the staff table, Harry watched Vandewater approach Draco.

*Come on, Draco. Give him your best.*

Draco saluted Dumbledore then turned to Vandewater and saluted formally. Vandewater didn't return it.

What a git.

"All right, boy," said Vandewater. "Let's see what Lucius taught you."

Draco held his own for about five minutes before Vandewater was done testing him and simply disarmed him.

"Not bad," said Vandewater with a shrug. "Considering who your master is. I could've done better with you though."

Then he completely dismissed Draco from his mind and looked down at Harry.

"Now," said Vandewater. "You boy."

Harry looked at Draco who jumped off the table. Harry summoned Revend again for him and handed the sword back. They clanked swords, one up one down.

"Destroy him, Harry," whispered Draco with feeling.

Harry got up on the table, his mind set.

"So, a Gryffindor Natural and a wizard who can do wandless magic as well," said Vandewater.

Harry shrugged. "Slytherin," implied Harry of Vandewater's house.

"Of course," said Vandewater.

Harry just sighed and turned to Dumbledore. He saluted him then Sirius who nodded encouragingly at him. Harry felt his courage growing after that nod and turned to Vandewater.

He held the blade up in salute and waited. When it looked like Vandewater wasn't going to return the salute, Harry said, "I face you to duel with honor, Mr. Vandewater."

Vandewater laughed. "Very well, boy." Vandewater saluted. "And it's Master Vandewater."

Harry took his stance, holding out his sword. "I don't call anyone Master," said Harry.

Vandewater attacked and Harry was surprised by the power behind the strokes. Lucius had pressed him this hard before and Harry felt the rise of his own strength in response to it. Harry's blocks became stronger and he was able to stop retreating and even land several advances.

"Interesting," said Vandewater, but he didn't let up. "Good instincts," muttered Vandewater as he found himself retreating.

Harry pressed on, all his focus on holding onto his sword.



The swords locked.

"You are indeed good, boy," said Vandewater. "But I doubt you have the stamina nor the endurance to hold up to me."

"You'd be surprised," said Harry, pushing him away.

Five minutes later, Vandewater did look surprised and he locked their swords again.

"You know that I know Lucius Malfoy and that I was in Slytherin," whispered Vandewater. "Do you know what that implies?"

Harry almost laughed. He may have come right out and said he was a Death Eater.

Harry pushed him away again.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" said Harry.

"Doesn't it?"

"Not particularly," said Harry.

"That brave are you?" said Vandewater with a knowing grin.

He really doesn't know. It was too perfect.

"So they tell me," said Harry.

Vandewater laughed lightly and attacked again. It was daunting but Harry's instincts didn't desert him, instead he kept hearing Lucius' voice in his head.

Make sure your blade is there before his is.

And it was, to the point where, with a sweeping blocking arc, both hands on the hilt of his sword, Harry let go of the sword with his right hand and moved his right leg back, blocking left handed.

Harry wasn't sure how it happened, but he blocked several blows lefty then with the same sweeping arc, switched back. Once the

sword was back in his right hand, a surge of energy hit him and he attacked with the same force Vandewater had been hitting him with.

With an angled thrust and a flick of his wrist, Vandewater's sword flew out of his hand and clattered to the floor beside the table as Harry lifted the point of his sword to Vandewater's throat.

There was dead silence in the hall as Vandewater looked at Harry in abject surprise. Harry took a step back and saluted. The hall then erupted again in surprised whoops of awe and delight.

Harry had won.

"Who - who taught you, boy," said Vandewater softly, both of them oblivious to the cheers of the hall around them. "Who is your master?"

"I told you, Mr. Vandewater," said Harry. "I call no one master, but my teacher's name is Lucius Malfoy."

Vandewater looked dumbstruck. "I don't believe you."

Harry sighed and ran a hand purposely through his hair. He looked back at Vandewater and saw the man's eyes go straight to Harry's scar, a look of recognition then fear crept over his features.

"Why would I lie, Mr. Vandewater?" said Harry. "When the truth is so much more satisfying."

Vandewater looked staggered, his hand over his chest. "You can't be-"

Harry stepped closer. "And if what you implied is true, then I can assume you had permission to come here. Which means my teacher would have known."

Harry turned his head and searched the hall with his eyes. He spotted two fully robed and hooded figures in the back. He could only see them from his vantage on the table and both faces were covered by shadow but Harry knew who they were.

He saluted them and turned back to the staff table. He saluted Dumbledore then Sirius again and jumped off the table, leaving Vandewater who continued to simply stare at him.

Harry clashed swords with Draco, one up one down. Draco looked like he wanted to grab Harry into a hug and cry at the same time. He leaned close to Draco's ear.

"Draco, your father saw the whole thing," said Harry.

"What?"

"He's here. I saw him in the back."

"My father's here?"

"Yes," said Harry. "So's Voldemort."

"That's who you saluted?"

"Vandewater implied during the duel that he was a Death Eater."

Draco burst out laughing.

Harry touched his shoulder briefly. "We did it," said Harry. "Did you see his face?"

"I saw it," said Draco, unable to wipe the smile off his face. "You did it."

But Harry was already walking around the table to get to Sirius and didn't hear.

He received congratulations and praise a number of times before he reached his godfather who instantly pulled Harry into a fierce hug.

"Harry, that was amazing," said Sirius, holding him away by the shoulders.

"I knew," said Harry. "Once I saw you, I knew I could do it."

Sirius eyes turned glassy and once again he pulled Harry into a hug.

Harry tried to let the events of the day wash out of him as he stood under the hot stream of water but couldn't quite seem to do it. He couldn't recall ever getting that amount of praise from his teachers or from Sirius, even when he had been credited for capturing Voldemort.

Dumbledore had asked him if he wanted to apply to become an Acknowledged Master but Harry had simply said he'd have to think about it. Fencing wasn't about acknowledgement, it was about fun, about escape.

Flying and fencing.

He couldn't help smiling as he rinsed his hair.

Pain exploded in his head and he hit his knees.

## Chapter 12

### The Vengeance Curse

"Harry, you all right in there?" said Ron who was outside the cubicle shaving.

"Voldemort's not here, is he?" said Harry.

"Er, no," said Ron.

"Damned signal," muttered Harry as he struggled to his feet. The pain hit again and again he hit his knees.

"Harry?"

"Throw me a towel, Ron," said Harry. "Before he drowns me."

Harry reached up and shut off the water and caught the towel Ron threw over the door. He wrapped it around his waist and opened the door, leaning on the wall.

Ron caught his arm when the next signal threatened to put Harry to his knees again.

"Good, God," said Ron. "What is the bloody urgency?"

"One guess," said Harry. He put a hand to his scar. *Voldemort*, he thought, hoping that would stop the signals.

"The duel?" said Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry. "He was there."

"What?"

"Vandewater is a Death Eater," said Harry. "Voldemort would have had to give his permission for Vandewater to come to Hogwarts."

"So Lucius saw you beat Vandewater?" said Ron with a grin.

"Yup," said Harry. "No doubt Voldemort wants to gloat now."

Ron chuckled. "Well you were rather spectacular, you know," said Ron. "Not that you want to hear it."

Ron helped him back to the dorm.

"Thanks, Ron," said Harry.

Harry managed to get dressed. Apparently calling Voldemort had worked because Voldemort didn't signal again. Hair still dripping, Harry grabbed his sword and Apparated to the campfire.

Strapping on the sword, he moved toward Voldemort's tent. He heard low voices from within and stepped inside. Everyone except Voldemort stood up as he entered.

"Ah, Harry, my boy," said Voldemort, smiling.

Harry took the occupants with a glance around - Lucius, Draco and Vandewater.

*Great.*

Harry looked at Voldemort and ran a hand through his wet hair.

"So what's so urgent that wouldn't wait until tonight and almost drowned me?"

Voldemort frowned. "Drown you?"

Harry sighed and moved to stand before Voldemort's desk. "I was in the shower," said Harry. "Your signal has gotten worse too."

"Ah, is that why you called me?"

"Yes," said Harry. "So what's this all about?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Surely you won't deny me my gloating rights, Harry."

"Why not," said Harry. "Lucius deserves all the credit."

"Ah, but my son brought down the infamous Terrance Vandewater," said Voldemort.

"You don't know that," said Harry.

"I saw it, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Are you sure he didn't let me-"

"You saw his face," said Voldemort. "That was not the expression of someone-"

"How could he *not* know who I was," said Harry logically.

"Master," said Vandewater.

"Quiet, Terrance," said Voldemort without releasing Harry's direct gaze.

"How many Harry's are there at Hogwarts," said Harry. "It's well known that I-"

"There are exactly four," said Voldemort.

"How-" Harry stopped himself. "Never mind," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, why do you argue with me?"

Harry heard Draco snort and almost laughed. "I refuse to answer that," said Harry but couldn't help his grin.

Voldemort laughed again.

"Master Harry," said Lucius. "He did not let you win."

Harry turned to him.

"I've known him for years," said Lucius. "He attacked you with everything he had."

Harry glanced at Vandewater.

"If I had known you were the master's son," said Vandewater. "I'm not sure what I would have done."

Lucius snorted. "I know what you would have done," said Lucius. "You would have deemed him beneath your dignity and declined to test him."

Vandewater dropped his gaze.

"Master Harry."

Harry looked back at Lucius.

"You honored me greatly today. Thank you."

"Mr. Malfoy," said Harry. "I was thanking you."

Lucius Malfoy nodded. "Draco told us what you two-um" he glanced at Draco. "Planned. And there-in lies the honor. That you would do that for me-"

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry stopped him. "You have no idea what you've done for me. Flying and Fencing. For that, I thank you."

Lucius grinned at him. "Very well, Master Harry," said Lucius. "Then you are most welcome."

"Well," said Voldemort. "Now that that is settled."

Harry looked at Voldemort. "There's more then?" said Harry.

Voldemort smiled at him and Harry dropped into his usual chair in front of Voldemort's desk.

"There seems to be some contention on who will continue your training," said Voldemort.

This surprised Harry and he turned to Lucius. Draco and Lucius had sat down when Harry had.

"Do I need more training?" Harry asked Lucius.



Harry blinked as Lucius rolled his eyes in disgust. He looked at Draco who's expression was somewhat grim.

"Terrance, do go on," said Voldemort with a knowing grin.

Terrance Vandewater paced out into the room.

"Well, honing the boy's skills will require a better practice partner," said Vandewater.

"But-" said Harry. Voldemort stopped him by raising a hand. His expression was a combination of amusement and smugness.

"And we must sharpen his instinct," Vandewater went on. "He can already draw from his internal magic, that much is clear. And his astonishing ability to switch hands like that must be developed."

Harry kept glancing from Lucius to Voldemort. Lucius looked bored although there was a marked menacing anger in his eyes as he glared at Vandewater. Voldemort continued to look like he was simply waiting.

Vandewater ended with, "Give him to me for a week, Master, and I'll have him more accomplished than Grand Master Curio himself."

Harry shot to his feet.

*Give him to me!!!*

A glance at Lucius showed total restraint even though his gray eyes looked ready to kill Vandewater as his presumption. With that glare, Harry realized just what Vandewater was trying to do and it was obviously eating away at Lucius. Lucius couldn't do anything if Voldemort agreed.

Harry's temper snapped for the first time in a while.

"Look, Vandewater," said Harry. "I don't know who the hell you think you are to presume to know what I need. You don't even know me. I don't need acknowledgement. I don't want it. I don't want a different practice partner. The one I have is the one I need."

"As for sharpening my instincts, you'll have to explain that one to me because as far as I know, that's why they are called instincts, because they're natural.

"And any honing can be done quite efficiently by my teacher," Harry went on. "Lucius may not have been able to beat you in the past - although when was the last time he tried - but he is an extraordinary teacher which as you also noticed was why I was able to switch hands."

Vandewater's jaw had dropped open.

"Lucius is ambidextrous," said Harry. "He is far more qualified than you to demonstrate that side of fencing.

"As for my internal magic, I have all ready been tested on it, and it was Lucius' training which helped me draw more from it."

"Oh," choked Vandewater.

Harry looked at Lucius who continued to look bored but his eyes had taken on a look of pride.

"Yes," said Harry. Harry quoted, "Make sure your blade is there before his is."

Lucius smiled then and he inclined his head. "Very good, Harry."

Harry turned back to Vandewater.

"And by the way," said Harry. "Voldemort has no authority to *give me* to anyone." Harry looked at Voldemort who was grinning as if Harry had just done exactly what Voldemort had expected. "Do you?" said Harry.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "Have you lost your temper?"

Voldemort was still smiling but Harry wasn't sure why.

"I was making a point," said Harry.

"And a valid one from what I heard," said Voldemort. He turned to Vandewater. "I believe that settles it, Terrance. Harry said no."

Terrance Vandewater looked as if he had just lost the Order of Merlin.

"Now," said Voldemort, "Harry, do you need to return to school before you come back for the celebration?"

Voldemort dropped it - just like that. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vandewater retreat a little.

"Ah, no," said Harry. "I can change here and I was hoping," he glanced at Draco, "bring your sword?"

"Of course," said Draco.

Harry grinned at him and looked at Lucius. He had never seen the man look so pleased or satisfied.

"With your permission, of course," said Harry as a further sting to Vandewater.

Lucius actually laughed and then to Harry's surprise and - well - shock, grabbed Harry and hugged him. When he held Harry away the gray eyes that used to look on him with loathing and contempt met his with pride and gratitude.

Then he turned to Voldemort. "The master is indeed lucky," said Lucius. "His son is magnificent."

Harry, feeling awkward, turned back to Voldemort expecting him to be furious that Lucius had touched Harry, let alone hug him, in his presence but Voldemort looked amused.

Harry leaned his hands on Voldemort's desk, looking at him squarely. Voldemort studied Harry's expression. He reached out and brushed the back of his knuckles down Harry's cheek.

Harry endured it and when Voldemort lowered his hand and before he could say anything, Harry said, "As long as you know I'm here, Voldemort."

"Yes?"

"Could you refrain from signaling me and just send someone if you want me?"

Voldemort grinned. "Will you beg me, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"Will you make me?"

Voldemort shook his head still grinning.

"I'm asking," said Harry.

"Very well," said Voldemort. "I will see you later."

"Oh, and about this party," said Harry. "I figured out what it's for."

"Did you?" said Voldemort.

"Yes," said Harry. "Short fuse, not stupid."

"You know?" said Draco, with surprise. "What is it?"

Harry shook his head not taking his eyes from Voldemort. "If Voldemort doesn't want it known that is his right," said Harry. "I just wanted him to know that I know."

"And do you really, Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry nodded and his smile turned to sad recognition. "I've been there, remember," said Harry.

Voldemort stared hard at him, then he nodded. "Mm, yes," said Voldemort. "I believe you do know."

Harry straightened and turned to the Malfoys. "Five minutes ok, Draco?" said Harry.

Draco nodded. "I'll be there. Do something with your hair."

Harry snorted and turned to Lucius. He drew his sword and saluted him then he turned, re-sheathing his sword.

"Harry," said Voldemort. Harry turned to him and his brows shot up.

With a laugh, Harry drew the sword again. "Excuse me," said Harry. "Can't exclude your exalted presence today of all days." Harry saluted him and he chuckled.

Harry again re-sheathed Sennie and turned, coming face to face with Terrance Vandewater.

"Good duel, by the way, Mr. Vandewater," said Harry and he left the tent.

Five minutes later, Harry ducked into the fencing tent. Draco and Lucius were waiting.

"Harry," said Draco. "What you did was so great."

"It was," said Lucius. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," said Harry. "That man is a presumptuous cretin with no manners and less honor."

Draco nodded and smiled.

"Give him to me for a week," Harry quoted. "Please."

"So that's what set off your temper?" said Lucius.

"Initially," said Harry. "But Voldemort has taught me to control it. It was your expression that made me lose it. I saw what he was doing. I'm sorry, you may have to accept what Voldemort says, but I don't."

"Harry-"

"You sat there helplessly listening to what Vandewater was suggesting, which was crap by the way," said Harry. "Knowing that if Voldemort approved, Vandewater would win again."

"Harry-"

"Voldemort knew I would lose my temper at his audacity. He expected it."

"You would have accepted punishment for my honor?" said Lucius with awe.

"At that point," said Harry. "Yes, although I was counting on what Draco told me that he wouldn't punish me."

Lucius shook his head. "After everything I've done to you."

Harry shrugged and looked at Draco. "What did you call it again?"

"What?" said Draco. "The Gryffindor Moronity?"

"Yeah, that's it," said Harry. He really didn't want to think about all the old animosity. The Malfoys before him didn't despise him. Draco's teasing, arrogant banter could snap Harry out of his self-defeating moods and Lucius was proud of him.

Harry wanted to enjoy it. He drew his sword. "Can we fence now?"

He and Draco sparred and Lucius watched them for a few minutes.

"Switch hands, Harry," said Lucius.

"I don't think I can," said Harry, blocking several blows. "Unless I have to." Actually, Harry's arm felt pretty tired.

"Hmm," said Lucius thoughtfully. "All right boys, stop." He crossed the room removing his robe.

"Father," said Draco. "Are you going to fence with Harry?"

"Yes," said Lucius. "I want to see if he can switch hands again."

"So do I."

They all turned toward the door of the tent where Vandewater stood. Harry dropped the tip of his sword to ground with a sigh. When he felt the burn on his head, he looked up again.

"More tests, Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Don't *you* want to know, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I guess," said Harry. He moved Sennie from his right hand to his left and clenched and unclenched his right hand, moving his arm from the shoulder. "I just don't know if I'm up to fencing Lucius right now. My arms getting a bit sore."

"Your arm is sore?" said Vandewater with concern.

"Well you have to admit, it's taken a beating today," said Harry.

Vandewater took a step in. "That *is* a Slytherin sword, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," said Lucius. "What else would I present to my student?"

Harry noticed the hint of possession in the statement and in Lucius' tone and almost laughed. He sent Draco a glance and found Draco struggling with his own amusement as well.

"And Master Harry is a Gryffindor," said Vandewater. "Isn't he?"

"Yes, Vandewater," said Lucius, his irritation growing. "What is the-"

"Nothing," said Vandewater. "Just curious. As he *is* a Natural, he would of course be able to use any sword."

Harry wondered if he should mention that the sword picked him but a glance at Lucius told him not too. Lucius' expression said '*Not yet, Harry.*'

"So," said Harry, holding up his sword.

Lucius took hold of his sword and tossed the sheath onto the table.

Harry offered Vandewater a salute then his eyes moved around the tent for Voldemort. Voldemort had magicked a comfy chair in the corner at the back of the room (away from Harry) to watch.

Harry inclined his head in silent thanks for keeping his distance and Voldemort chuckled. Harry saluted him and turned to Lucius. Lucius saluted the masters of the room and then they saluted.

Harry took his stance. "Go easy on me, Lucius," said Harry softly.

Lucius smiled, shaking his head. "Modesty," he muttered then looked at Harry's stance. "I know it's been a while, Harry," said Lucius. "But..."

"Oh," said Harry, noticing Maldini in Lucius left hand. "Sorry." He readjusted his stance to face a left-handed opponent.

"Very good," said Lucius and he swung.

Harry felt only twinges of pain in his arm as he sparred with Lucius for the first few minutes. When Lucius blows became harder and more complex, he felt the draw of his instinct on his internal magic and with a circular swing, he again changed hands. He blocked with his left hand and immediately felt the tension leave his right arm.

"Excellent," said Lucius, pressing another blow. "You can block quite well with your left hand. I can show you how to advance with it."

Harry nodded, his concentration on their swords.

*Make sure your blade is there before his.*

With another graceful circular swing, Sennie was back in his right hand and he felt the pain immediately.

Lucius' swipe wasn't even that hard, but with a gasp, Harry dropped his sword, clutching his right arm.

Lucius stared at the fallen sword for a second then looked at Harry. He put his hand on Harry's right shoulder and Harry flinched away.

"What is it, Harry?" said Lucius.

Harry's eyes left his and sought Voldemort's across the room.

Voldemort stood up and moved towards them. "Harry, you are in pain," said Voldemort.

"What?" said Vandewater.



"I can always see when my son is in pain, Terrance," said Voldemort as he stopped before Harry. "He has a great tolerance for it, so it must be severe presently for him to drop his sword."

"I can't feel my fingers," said Harry.

Vandewater approached them cautiously. Harry clutched his arm tightly to his chest. The back of his hand had started to swell.

Vandewater leaned down to pick up Sennie.

"Don't touch his sword," said Lucius. Vandewater looked up at him. "It's an Entrapped Sword."

Vandewater took a startled step back. "It can't be," said Vandewater. "There are almost none left. My own is one and-"

"Yours is Entrapped?" said Lucius.

"Yes," said Vandewater worriedly. "How could you know Master Harry's is?"

"Because the sword picked him, Vandewater," said Lucius harshly. "It told him."

"It told him?" said Vandewater with disbelief.

"Harry is a parselmouth," said Voldemort.

Vandewater gasped. "What?"

"Harry has much of me and my powers within him, Terrance," said Voldemort. "We are both a part of each other. As you know, he is my heir."

"No," said Vandewater backing away. "Master, I didn't know, didn't realize. How could I?"

Vandewater dropped to his knees.

Lucius took a step toward him looking furious. "It's a Vengeance Curse," growled Lucius. "Isn't it?"

"It's been on my sword for generations," sputtered Vandewater defensively. "It only works on Slytherins with Entrapped Swords. It shouldn't have worked on Master Harry."

"It obviously has," said Voldemort not without menace.

"Master, all the circumstances had to be right. I didn't know he was part Slytherin nor that he had an Entrapped Sword."

Vandewater looked terrified but Harry was getting light-headed. He slowly sank to his knees. Someone fell to one knee beside his and took hold of his left arm.

"Can we fight about this later?" said Draco with concern. "Maybe we should help Harry."

"Yes, Draco," said Voldemort. "Terrance, if you wish to live, you will tell us precisely what needs to be done."

"Of course, Master," said Vandewater. "But it depends on what type of snake is imprisoned in Master Harry's sword."

"Why?" said Lucius.

"Because the curse would have made the snake bite him."

"You mean I've been bitten by my own sword?" said Harry.

"Yes, Master Harry."

"But Sennie said he would serve me."

"It's a very powerful, very old, dark curse, Harry," said Lucius. "I doubt Sennie could have fought it."

"So what do we do?" said Draco, whose grip on Harry was keeping him from falling the rest of the way to the floor.

"We should make him comfortable first," said Vandewater.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "Lucius, Draco, help him into his tent."

But the minute Lucius took hold of his right arm, Harry cried out in pain and passed out.

Harry woke up hearing Voldemort.

"Sennie is most distressed at what he has done - been forced to do. Of course, he will do anything to help. Unfortunately, he calls himself a *vipeira* which does us little good."

"So we don't know what he is," Harry heard Severus Snape say.

"He must be allowed out of the sword," said Lucius.

"Master Harry must free him," said Vandewater.

"I have everything even remotely needed for an anti-venom potion," said Severus. "But-"

Harry's groan cut Snape off. Harry had been taking in the surroundings. He was in a chair in his office, his arm stretched out on a pillow. It was his arm that had made him groan. The pain was there, but the sight was worse. The sleeve of his shirt had been torn off. His hand was swollen worse than before and his arm from his knuckles to his shoulder was horrific shades of black, blue and purple.

*Great.*

## Chapter 13

### Remedies and Reasonings

"Harry, try not to move," Harry heard Draco's voice.

Draco was sitting beside his chair on Harry's left. Lucius was standing on Harry's right looking down at Harry's arm with dismay. Across the room, Severus stood behind a table strewn with potion making paraphernalia. Voldemort was standing in front of the chair he usually used and Vandewater was on his knees before him.

"What's going on?" said Harry.

"We're trying to find a way to keep you alive," said Draco.

"Why bother," said Harry automatically.

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry," said Voldemort. "But I thought you told me that you were taking me with you."

"Oh yeah," muttered Harry. "Almost forgot."

Voldemort chuckled again. Draco snorted.

"Can't I just call Rowan?" said Harry.

"NO!" came quickly from Voldemort, Lucius and Severus at once.

"Who's Rowan?" said Vandewater but everyone ignored him.

"Why not?" said Harry. "Fawkes healed the bite of the Basilisk."

"If this was simply a snake bite," said Voldemort. "Then there wouldn't be a problem."

"Then what-"

"Because it's combined with a Dark curse," said Lucius staring gray ice at Vandewater. "Calling her now would complicate things."

"Who's Rowan?" said Vandewater again.

"My phoenix," said Harry to shut him up. Vandewater gasped but Harry was looking at Voldemort. "Why would she complicate things?"

"I've seen her with you, Harry," said Voldemort. "She is very possessive. She would be most distressed and frustrated that she couldn't help you."

"And," prompted Harry, having heard one.

"And," said Voldemort, "she would in all likelihood fly into a rage and attack anyone even remotely involved in your condition."

"Why would you think that?" Harry asked somewhat surprised.

Voldemort sighed. "Because she picked you, Harry," said Voldemort. "She is like you, has the same characteristics. She would react the same way you would."

Harry opened his mouth to ask but stopped himself. "Short fuse," said Harry not being able to stop his grin.

Voldemort nodded and lifted a brow. "Have you ever seen an enraged phoenix?"

Harry shook his head and sighed. "So what now?"

"Since there is a curse involved," said Severus. "Additional ingredients will be needed for the potion. However, I still need to find out what bit you so I can formulate that anti-venom potion."

"Unfortunately, Sennie doesn't know what we would call him," said Draco.

"We have to be able to see him," said Lucius. He held Harry's sword out.

Harry took the sheath with his left hand and looked down at the hilt. He looked at Voldemort.

"So what do I have to do?" said Harry.

"First, get him to talk to you," said Voldemort. "He is most distressed and ashamed of what he did."

"But it wasn't his fault, right?" said Harry.

"Correct, Harry," said Voldemort. "But most snakes consider themselves stronger than Dark Magic."

Harry nodded and looked back at the hilt.

"Sennie," called Harry. The sword was silent. *"Sennie, talk to me."*

"Stubborn," said Voldemort.

Harry sent him a glance.

*"Sennie, I know it wasn't your fault. It's alright. I don't blame you for what happened."*

*"Oh, master, how can you forgive me?"*

*"I do,"* said Harry. *"I know it wasn't your fault."*

"But I should-"

"Sennie," said Voldemort. *"It was a very powerful Dark curse. Not even a Basilisk could have fought it."*

"But-"

*"The thing is,"* said Harry. *"I need your help. Will you help me?"*

Sennie's tone changed instantly. *"Of course, master. What do you want me to do?"*

*"I need you to come out of the sword."*

*"I can not do that, master."*

Harry looked at Voldemort.

"Tell him his debt of servitude has been fulfilled," said Voldemort.  
"And you free him."

Harry turned back to the sword and told Sennie.

"Master, how can you free me after what I've done?"

*"You can't serve me from the sword right now, Sennie,"* said Harry. *"I free you. Come out."*

The golden hilt started to glow then crack. Like molten liquid a form emerged and solidified into the shape of a head. Slowly, the formed flowed out of the hilt and slithered free of the sword. It coiled over Harry's leg and wrapped itself around Harry's left wrist and forearm.

It wasn't large, maybe two and a half, three feet long and very thin. It lifted it's head and looked at Harry, it's tongue forking out.

Harry smiled. *"Hello, Sennie."* The others in the room gasped and Harry turned his attention to them. "Problem?" said Harry.

Draco actually got up and stepped away as the snake coiled further up Harry's arm.

"Harry," said Draco. "That's an asp."

As the only non-Slytherin in the room, Harry felt a little out of his league. He looked at Voldemort. "Is that good or bad?"

Voldemort looked at Severus and Harry turned to him as well. Snape was already throwing things into a caldron.

Glancing quickly to Voldemort then to Harry, Severus said, "It isn't too bad, actually, although I'm surprised he isn't dead yet - which I am assuming can be contributed to his Gryffindor blood. The potion itself is easy enough and it cooks quickly." He looked at Vandewater with a glare Harry was well acquainted with. "What are the curse ingredients, Vandewater?" said Severus.

"My blood," said Vandewater. "Master Harry's blood and," he hesitated.

Voldemort reached down and took Vandewater by the hair to tilt his face up.

"Terrance," Voldemort said quite seriously. "Do go on."

"Um, well," stammered Vandewater. "The blood of a Slytherin ancestor."

"But, I don't-"

"Harry-" Voldemort interrupted, releasing Vandewater and straightening. He turned to Harry. "That would be me, my boy."

"But-"

"Everything Slytherin in you, Harry, is from me," said Voldemort with unmistakable pride.

Harry opened his mouth and Voldemort's brows shot up daring him to argue that particular point. Harry closed his mouth again and swallowed.

"How much?" said Severus, approaching Vandewater with a dagger.

"Three drops from all of us, but-" Vandewater paused and took a breath and swallowed hard. "Well, er-"

With agility that surprised Harry, Voldemort once again had Terrance Vandewater by the hair as he leaned over the cowering wizard. This time Voldemort's wand was stuck to his throat.

"Shall we do this the hard way, Terrance?" said Voldemort mildly although his expression was far from pleasant.

"N-No, master."

Harry could see the sheer terror in Vandewater's eyes as he looked up at Voldemort. When had Harry forgotten just what inspired such fear?

"Then let's have it all in one go, shall we," Voldemort suggested.



Vandewater responded instantly. "Faster results will occur if at least five drops of the purest Slytherin blood are used. Master, considering you are a direct heir-"

Voldemort released him and waved his hand dismissively. "Of course," said Voldemort. "I understand. Harry will have what ever is necessary." Voldemort settled into his chair. "Proceed, Severus."

Snape took some blood from Vandewater's arm then took another vial and approached Harry.

"The blood must be untainted," said Vandewater. "Take the blood from as far away from the poison as possible."

Severus nodded and knelt down before Harry. He pushed up the leg of Harry's pants and stabbed the blade into his left ankle, drawing some blood. After quickly mending the cut magically, he stood up and looked down at Harry.

"Alright?" said Severus.

Harry blinked up at him. With a glance at his swollen, discolored arm, he smirked back. "You're kidding, right," said Harry.

Severus grimaced but Harry heard Voldemort chuckle.

Severus turned to Voldemort. "My lord."

Voldemort held out his arm. "Just do it, Severus, before Harry gets any worse."

Severus did then he went to finish the potion.

"Master," said Vandewater. "You must see if Sennie knows what he must do."

Harry looked at Sennie. In response, the snake moved further up Harry's arm to look at his face.

"*Sennie,*" Voldemort called him and the snake turned his head to look at Voldemort. "*Do you know what must be done?*"

*"My lord," said Sennie. "Are you my master's master?"*

*"I am the master," said Voldemort. "Harry is my son."*

Sennie looked back at Harry, his tongue darting out. *"I sense, can smell, his strength. It is what woke me up."*

*"So, you know what to do?"* said Harry.

*"Yes, master,"* said Sennie then he looked at Voldemort. *"He will need assistance."*

*"What do you mean?"* Harry asked.

Sennie lowered his head. *"I'm sorry, master. It will hurt."*

Harry sighed and looked at Draco, who had sat back down when it appeared that Sennie wasn't going to hurt anyone.

"Great," said Harry.

*"Five parsecs after he drinks, he will be cut at the bite,"* Sennie told Voldemort. *"I will do the rest."*

*"Understood,"* said Voldemort.

"What's a parsec?" said Harry.

"Do not worry, Harry," said Voldemort. "I will deal with the time. You will have enough to deal with."

Severus approached with the cup and held it out to Harry. Harry took it with his left hand and peered into it.

"Lucius," said Voldemort. "You will have to restrain him. Draco, be prepared to help if necessary."

Draco nodded and bit his lip.

"All part of the joys of fencing," said Harry and he looked up at Lucius. "Right?"

Lucius shook his head but Draco snorted at Harry's jest.

"Down in one, Harry," said Severus.

Harry sighed again and gazed back into the cup. As an afterthought, he looked at Terrance Vandewater, still on his knees beside Voldemort. The man still appeared afraid and desperate. He raised the cup to him.

"To one damn good duel," said Harry then he drank, draining the cup.

The concoction was as vile as any and Harry sputtered on it, coughing. The jolt on his arm made pain shoot up his arm and he cried out through gritted teeth. The cup fell out of his hand as he grasped at something stable.

"Honestly," said Harry as the pain receded. "Don't you know any potions that taste even remotely pleasant?"

Severus grimaced. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry looked at his left hand. Draco's wrist was clutched in Harry's death grip.

"Sorry," muttered Harry but before he could let go, Draco's other hand clamped over Harry's.

"Just keep holding on," said Draco. "I have a feeling it's going to get worse."

"One minute, Severus," said Voldemort, who had his eyes on a pocket watch.

Severus retrieved a small ceramic bowl and another dagger and stood before Harry. Sennie moved around Harry's neck and wrapped himself around Harry's right shoulder and arm pit.

Before Harry could ask what was about to happen, Voldemort said, "Now, Severus."

In one motion, Severus picked up Harry's hand and slashed open the back of it while Sennie constricted around Harry's shoulder.

Harry screamed, his body convulsing against the pain as Sennie coiled tightly down Harry's arm, squeezing the venom out of his body.

"Don't look at it."

Harry heard Draco's words but his eyes were squeezed tightly closed, his jaw clamped shut and his head thrown back. He didn't feel Lucius' hands holding him down at the shoulders nor did he feel his bone cracking grip on Draco's wrist.

What he felt was akin to the skin being pulled slowly off his arm from the shoulder down. When Sennie contracted around Harry's hand, Harry screamed again then felt nothing.

Harry woke and managed not to groan.

"I still feel responsible for this, Master."

"Lucius," said Voldemort.

Lucius voice came from somewhere behind him. Voldemort's from his usual chair.

"I should have noticed Vandewater's alarm over Harry's arm being sore," said Lucius.

"Lucius," said Voldemort.

"And if it weren't for me," Lucius went on, clearly distressed. "Harry wouldn't have pressed with such determination to beat him.

"Lucius," said Voldemort again and apparently the annoyance in his tone was enough to finally get Lucius' attention. "Do you think even without your influence, Harry would have been less determined to beat Terrance?"

"Probably not, my lord," said Lucius.

"Of course not. And did the soreness of his arm stop Harry from sparring with you?"

"No, master," Lucius conceded again. "But you can't attribute this to Master Harry's stubbornness."

"Oh, no, Lucius," said Voldemort. "In fact, there is such a combination of freak coincidences and chance involved here that there is little evidence of blame anywhere. Terrance should have told us immediately that there was a Vengeance Curse on his sword," Voldemort continued. "He was punished for it, but he did not put the curse on the sword himself - regardless I have removed the curse. The chain of events which occurred was in fact all chance; Harry using an Entrapped Sword, Harry being part Slytherin. Terrance was correct in saying he could not have known any of it." Voldemort sighed. "This has been an unfortunate accident and we must simply deal with it."

There was a brief silence and Harry tried to convince himself that he hadn't just overheard Voldemort acting - well - fair.

"But Vandewater-"

"Lucius," Voldemort's tone was a warning. "Terrance was punished and since Harry was forced to free Sennie, I have had Terrance free his own Entrapped snake."

"Fitting," said Lucius. "But it doesn't appear as if Sennie is in any hurry to leave Master Harry."

Since Harry felt Sennie coiled loosely around his left arm, he wondered about that. He shifted slightly and the snake reacted, moving up his arm.

"Master? Master?"

*"I'm alright, Sennie,"* Harry told the snake.

He actually felt alright. His arm was wrapped from shoulder to knuckles with a heated bandage which was soothing and it was in a loose sling against his chest. It was sore but he wasn't uncomfortable.

"How do you feel, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"Not bad," said Harry. He wiggled his fingers to test them and winced. He sat up and looked around. There were only the three of them in the office.

"My lord?" Draco's voice rose from the door.

"Come in, Draco," said Voldemort. "Harry is awake."

Draco came in holding another cup. He brought it to Harry. "Alright?"

Harry eyed the cup. "Yeah, I'm ok," said Harry. "What's that?"

"It's a potion to keep your arm from getting infected," said Draco, holding it out.

Harry scowled but took it. "More of Severus' vile potions?" muttered Harry. "Great."

Sennie coiled up to Harry's hand and peered into the cup, his tongue darting out.

"Master," said Severus as he too entered the tent.

"What is it, Severus?" said Voldemort.

"The family is arriving," said Severus.

"Very well," said Voldemort as he stood up. "I will address them in a few minutes."

Severus turned to Harry. "Drink it," he said sternly.

"Alright, alright." Harry took a sip and, expecting the worst, almost choked again.

"That bad?" said Draco, pulling a face.

Harry took another sip and looked at Severus who wore a smug little grin.

"No," said Harry. "It's good." Severus nodded. "Tastes like orange soda."

Harry drained the cup, ignoring Draco's puzzled look, and moved to stand up.

A hand fell to his shoulder. "Where do you think you're going?"

Harry looked up at Lucius. "Severus said the Death Eaters were arriving." He turned to Voldemort. "What time is dinner?"

"Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry shrugged out of Lucius' grasp and stood up, setting the cup on the desk.

"You should rest," said Severus.

Harry kept his eyes on Voldemort. "I said I would come and I'm here."

"Harry," said Voldemort again, this time with a warning tone.

"Since when has some Dark curse stopped me?" Harry challenged. "I've been hit with worse ones, which everyone here knows."

Voldemort opened his mouth but Harry pressed on.

"And I've been bitten by bigger snakes," said Harry. He sent Draco a glance. "We had a party after that one too."

Draco smiled and nodded.

Harry turned resolutely back to Voldemort. "What time is dinner?"

"Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry walked straight up to him, inside the flinch zone. "You know how stubborn I am," he said.

Voldemort searched his expression then reached out and touched his face. Harry endured it, their gazes locked.

"Hm, yes, I know," said Voldemort quietly. "And you have taken this unfortunate incident with your usual perseverance." His fingers trailed up towards Harry's scar.

Harry shut his eyes briefly.

"But if I say you need to rest," said Voldemort. "I can make you."

"You said you were pleased," said Harry, his voice soft. "I defeated the great Terrance Vandewater, an Acknowledged Fencing Master and a Death Eater, in an honorable duel."

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Then allow me my own gloating rights."

Voldemort threw back his head and laughed. "Well said, Harry," said Voldemort, removing his hand from Harry's face. "I have taught you well. Dinner is at 7:00 but take all the time you need."

Harry inclined his head and took a step back out of the flinch zone.

"Call me if you require assistance and I will send someone."

"I think I can manage," said Harry.

Voldemort glanced around. "Everyone - out," said Voldemort. He turned back to Harry as the two were left alone. "Don't be stubborn about asking for help, Harry. You're not alone anymore."

Harry watched him leave, hearing the statement echo in his head.

You're not alone anymore.

Draco was right. Voldemort was getting to him. He defied asking for help.

He managed to get cleaned up and into a shirt but it was a losing battle with the buttons. The fingers on his right hand refused to cooperate.

"Harry?" he heard from the door.



"Come in Draco," said Harry, sounding as frustrated as he felt.

"Lord Voldemort sent me to-" Draco cut himself off and laughed. "Guess he was right," said Draco, noticing Harry's struggle.

"Shut up, Draco," muttered Harry.

"Oh, don't be so pathetic," said Draco. "Anyway, you can't wear that."

"What's wrong with it?" said Harry, looking down at the dark gray pants and pale blue shirt.

Draco simply moved to Harry's wardrobe and pulled out a dark green silk shirt.

"Gloating rights," said Draco. "Dress to impress."

"Don't tell me," said Harry with a smirk. "Matches my eyes."

"So you aren't color blind," said Draco with amusement as he helped Harry out of and into the new shirt. When Draco stood before Harry again, he pulled out his wand. "*Enclocius*," said Draco and the buttons did themselves up.

Harry looked at him with surprise.

"Little spell I picked up when I was milking that hippogriff incident," said Draco.

Harry blinked then let out a small laugh as he tucked in the shirt. "Yeah, well, that still was a rotten thing to do." Harry couldn't get angry. All those incidents ended up with Sirius getting away.

"I know," said Draco, using the spell to do up Harry's cuffs. "I'm a Slytherin bastard, remember."

"You are," said Harry and Draco looked up. "And I'm a pathetic Gryffindor moron."

Draco grinned and Harry shook his head as he moved to the mirror and picked up a brush.

"A pathetic Gryffindor Natural who beat Terrance Vandewater and survived a Vengeance Curse," corrected Draco. "And I'd give up on your hair, if I were you."

Harry turned. "Which you're glad you're not."

Draco either didn't hear him or chose not to reply. He was shuffling through Harry's wardrobe.

"The red one, I think," said Draco, pulling out a cloak. He turned back to Harry. "You want to sling that back up?" said Draco, indicating Harry's arm.

"No. I'll manage," said Harry.

Draco nodded and swung the cloak around him, fastening it at the shoulder.

"That's better."

"Presentable?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Draco and they moved through to Harry's office. "Do you want to wear your sword?"

Harry glanced around and saw it on his desk, the gold of the hilt still cracked open.

"No. I don't think so," said Harry. "It doesn't seem the same without Sennie in it."

"You can always re-entrap him."

"That wouldn't be right," said Harry. "He's been in that sword long enough."

Sennie slithered up the back of the chair. He had followed them out of the bedroom. Harry held out his hand and Sennie wrapped around his wrist, moving up Harry's forearm.

"What does master wish of me?"

*"I freed you, Sennie. I am not your master anymore."*

"Sennie chooses to serve you, Master. Sennie will stay with you and serve you inside the sword or out."

Harry smiled. *"Alright, Sennie. I would have missed you being part of my sword, but you don't have to stay in it all the time."*

"Thank you, Master."

Harry told Draco what had just happened and he looked impressed.

"Cool," said Draco. "Ready?"

"I guess." Sennie coiled to a comfortable spot on Harry's arm and they left the tent.

As they moved through the compound, Draco whispered, "Are you going to tell me what the party is for?"

"Promise not to tell anyone?"

"I swear," said Draco.

"It's his birthday," said Harry.

Draco blinked. "How did you figure it out?"

"Well, no one else seemed to know, so I figured it couldn't be some important Dark related anniversary," said Harry. "It had to be personal. He grew up in a Muggle orphanage - no big parties there. Tom Riddle went to Hogwarts. It wasn't hard to look it up in the alumni records."

Draco looked impressed again. "Logical," said Draco. "Did you actually look it up?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Curiosity," said Harry with a shrug but he could see by Draco's expression that he didn't buy it. "Alright, so I needed to know."

Draco made what sounded like a sympathetic snort. "You said you'd been there," said Draco curiously.

Harry blinked at him. "You think I got so much as a 'happy birthday, Harry' before I was eleven?"

Draco shook his head.

"I know, I know," said Harry. "I'm pathetic."

Draco laughed at that. "No wonder you're such a cynic."

"Ah, boys," said Voldemort as they reached the table.

Every Death Eater stood up at Harry's arrival and Harry sent a glance down the table. The number of them was staggering. He simply moved around the table and sat down in the second seat to Voldemort's right. The Death Eaters didn't sit down. Lucius raised his glass.

Lucius proposed a toast to Harry, enumerating his skill, perseverance and endurance of the day's events. Harry was sure he was turning red.

To his left, Draco leaned close to ear.

"Gloating rights," whispered Draco. "Enjoy it while you can."

Harry nodded and picked up his cup. He glanced at Lucius then turned to Voldemort. "And it seems I've managed to achieve all this on a very prestigious day," said Harry as he raised the cup to Voldemort.

Voldemort's expression turned to one of elation and he laughed with true delight as he picked up his cup. Harry was sure he'd never seen the wizard so happy.

"Well said, my son."

The table drank and everyone sat down. Draco fell into his seat beside Harry and leaned close to him again.

"You're bloody brilliant," said Draco.

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"You've got him wrapped around your finger," whispered Draco. "Look at him. He's so pleased with you right now, you could ask him for anything in the world and he'd give it to you."

Harry almost answered sarcastically until he realized what he was doing.

Voldemort wasn't getting to him. Voldemort had gotten to him.

Harry looked at Voldemort. Traces of the once handsome headboy could be seen in his features, especially as happy as he appeared now. Rejuvenated almost completely, between potions to restore his health, and magical strength from Harry himself, his confidence and authority exuded from him. The only trait that remained of the wizard Harry had met in the graveyard now was the glowing red eyes, still intense, still all knowing.

Still cruel, merciless? Harry hadn't seen either in a long while. Was he still that Evil Dark Lord that everyone, including the Minister of Magic feared to even speak his name?

He still craved power that was a certainty and something Voldemort had never denied. But where was the monster who would do anything to ascertain that power? Who would kill anyone who stood in his way? Who had killed the Potters?

The Evil Dark Lord that everyone expected Harry to kill.

His gaze met and locked with those red eyes. They stared back intently, searching, reading Harry's expression.

"Relax, Harry," said Voldemort. "You're not ready yet."

He knows everything! Harry rolled his eye.

"I hate it when you do that," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled.

## Chapter 14

### The Dark Mark

Back at school the next day, Harry's absence Saturday afternoon and night had been attributed to his stay in the Hospital wing. Aware now that Harry had been unknowingly hit with and had survived yet another dark curse, the students were more at ease with him.

There was a whole reverence around the castle that Harry was still fighting the dark arts and even the Ministry was relieved. Harry had even gotten a get well owl from the Minister.

Many of the students found the whole sword thing fascinating and had asked Harry all about his Entrapped Sword. Harry introduced several of them to Sennie, who resided around his arm or around his neck when not in his sword, and had told them how the Vengeance Curse worked.

Harry's arm was healing nicely but Madam Pomfrey made him wear the sling for several weeks with explicit instructions not to do anything strenuous with it - including fencing. She insisted that he had to work gradually or he could permanently damage the muscles of his arm.

This Harry only half obeyed, as stubborn as he was.

How was he to regain strength in his arm without...

"Watch your posture," said Lucius.

Harry continued to retreat, blocking Lucius' stronger blows. Lucius refused to go easy on him, knowing Harry wouldn't stand for it.

Thrusting up, Harry locked their swords in the air. Fencing left handed was hard enough but with his right arm slung to his chest, it was a horror.

"How can I watch my posture," said Harry with irritation. "I have no balance."

Harry stepped away from Lucius and swiped off the sling.

"Harry," said Lucius.

Harry flexed his arm a few times then took Sennie into his right hand. He looked up at Lucius. Lucius was frowning at him.

"It's been a week," said Harry. "You're the best one I know to help get my arm back to normal."

"Flattery?" said Lucius with a suspicious grin.

"Is it working?" said Harry.

Lucius laughed. "All right, Harry," said Lucius. "But only for a few minutes. We'll see how strong the arm is for now."

Harry nodded and they began again. There was only minimal pain so Harry didn't mention it but his strength was poor at best.

Lucius was frowning again. "I wish the master had let me kill the bastard," he muttered.

"It really wasn't his fault," said Harry. "Although he is a bastard."

"Are you defending him?"

"Certainly not," said Harry. "But I would like to see you duel him."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Harry, retreating again.

"Why?"

"Because I bet you could beat him now," said Harry. "When was the last time you fenced with him."

"Maybe ten or twelve years ago."

"Exactly," said Harry. "I'd love to see you beat him."

Lucius took a step back and Harry used the opportunity to rest his arm.



"You think I could beat him?" said Lucius.

"You taught me and I beat him," argued Harry. "He's spent the last ten years teaching and boasting not seriously fencing with anyone. You've improved yourself, he's stayed the same."

"Interesting point," said Lucius.

Harry re-sheathed his sword as he saw Lucius sheath his own, indicating they were done. Sennie instantly emerged from the hilt and coiled up Harry's arm.

"But I doubt he's got the nerve to fight me now," said Lucius.

Harry strapped his sword belt on and looked at Lucius with a grin. "I could just drop a few choice phrases in front of Voldemort and see what happens," said Harry.

Lucius laughed and reached out and ruffled Harry's hair. "Becoming quite the Slytherin, aren't you, Harry," said Lucius.

Harry sobered at the remark. "Yeah, well," said Harry. "As Draco keeps telling me, I should enjoy it while I can."

"Indeed," said Lucius as he put Maldini back on its place on the wall.

"Lucius?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"What do *you* think of the prophecies?" said Harry.

"I really don't think you want to know," said Lucius without looking at Harry. "And I think you should get back to school, now."

Harry nodded. "I have to see Voldemort before I leave," said Harry, grabbing his robe. "I told him I would."

"Harry."

Harry turned back and caught the sling Lucius had tossed to him.

"Don't let him see you without it on."

Harry felt the burn before Lucius had even finished the sentence. He knew Voldemort was standing behind him now and could tell by Lucius expression that the Dark Lord was probably looking none too pleased.

Without turning around, Harry said, "He knows how stubborn I am."

Harry heard the chuckle and turned around.

Voldemort's hand came to rest on Harry's cheek and Harry closed his eyes briefly.

"Yes, indeed, I do," said Voldemort, staring into Harry's eyes. "But you will put it back on now because if any permanent damage is caused I *will* kill him and I don't think you want that."

Voldemort removed his hand and Harry shook his head.

Harry put the sling back on and grumbled, "I'd love to see Lucius kill him in a fencing duel though."

He heard Lucius gasp at the comment. Harry had dropped it so casually as if they weren't just discussing the very topic.

"Would you?" said Voldemort.

"Hell, yes," muttered Harry as he shrugged into his robe, draping the right side over his shoulder. He looked up at Voldemort. Voldemort was staring at Lucius. Lucius looked a little pale. "What?"

Voldemort returned his gaze to Harry. "If I arrange this for you," said Voldemort. "Will you agree to, win or lose, allow Vandewater to instruct you?"

Harry's jaw dropped open a little. "Why?"

"To see if there is indeed anything he can teach you, of course," said Voldemort.

"Is everything a negotiation with you?" said Harry with frustration.

"With you, it seems I must," said Voldemort. "Well?"

"All right," said Harry. He looked at Lucius expecting him to look pleased, but Lucius looked even paler than before as he stared at Voldemort with an almost pleading look.

"See how stubborn my son is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "I must be careful with what is mine."

Slowly it dawned on Harry what Voldemort had just done. He figured Harry had made the request for Lucius even after all the other ways Harry had shown his gratitude and Voldemort was getting tired of it.

Voldemort's possessiveness demanded that Lucius be punished for getting too close to Harry.

*Give him to me.*

And Harry had just agreed.

Voldemort turned Harry's face back to him and Harry could tell he knew Harry had figured it out.

"I will let you know when the duel is to take place," said Voldemort, still holding Harry's face. "You best get back to school."

Voldemort took two steps back, holding Harry's gaze. Harry didn't want to get Lucius into anymore trouble and simply nodded and apparated back to the common room.

He instantly went searching for Draco but Harry couldn't find him.

*Great.* More guilt.

He was on the way to lunch the next day when he saw a group of Slytherin's huddled together across the corridor. He couldn't hear what they were muttering about and Harry was about to ignore them and continue to the Great Hall when he heard Draco's name then his voice.

Harry felt he needed to speak to him. He had to know what had happened to Lucius.

"Malfoy," called Harry.

The group all turned to him and they instantly parted so that Draco could move to Harry. They moved further along the hall.

"Where have you been?" said Harry.

"I had to see my father," said Draco.

Harry groaned. "Draco, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to get him in trouble."

Draco sighed. "It's not your fault," said Draco. "My father knows how possessive he is with you."

"He didn't hurt him, did he?" said Harry.

"No, his punishment was losing you to Vandewater for as long as you can tolerate it," said Draco.

Harry stared at him, not quite believing that that was it.

"Draco."

"Look, can we just drop it," said Draco. He glanced toward his Slytherin crowd. "You guys can go," he called to them.

Harry watched as the group dispersed and couldn't help his grin. "Back in the fold as the prince of Slytherin, are you?"

"Sort of," grumbled Draco.

"Sort of," echoed Harry as they moved up the hall toward the great hall. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," said Draco.

Harry stopped. "Nothing?" said Harry. "Come on. What is it?"

"I told you nothing."

"Yeah, and last time I told you nothing was wrong, you pestered me until I couldn't stand it anymore," said Harry.

Draco didn't even smile over that.

"Something's eating you," said Harry.

"Know me so well now, do you?" said Draco.

"Don't I?"

"Look," said Draco. "I can't tell you, so drop it." He started to move away and Harry grabbed his arm.

"You can't tell me?" said Harry.

Draco pulled his arm away. "You heard me," said Draco.

*See how stubborn my son is. I must be careful of what is mine.*

*He wants you, doesn't he?*

"He didn't," said Harry in disbelief. "Tell me he didn't."

Draco looked at Harry and shook his head. His gaze dropped to the floor. "You know it was only a matter of time for me."

Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco's robe and dragged him into the nearest empty classroom. He slammed the door.

"Why couldn't you tell me?" said Harry.

"Ever been to an Initiation?" said Draco.

"No," said Harry.

"I don't think he wants you to know about it."

"Why?" said Harry curious and angry at the same time.

Draco looked away again. "Because it's painful," said Draco. "And a bit - er humbling."

"Humbling?"

Draco's gaze snapped up and his eyes glowed with his own anger now. "Ok, so it was humiliating," snapped Draco. "Especially for me. Even if it *is* supposed to be the proudest moment of my life."

Harry heard his bitterness and he could see passed the anger to his shame.

"Damn it," said Harry softly. "It's my fault."

Draco looked at him. "It isn't," said Draco. "It was just-"

"But because of me, he did it now," said Harry.

"Harry," said Draco.

Harry got angry again, for Draco's helplessness and his own. Draco hadn't wanted that mark on him. Harry suddenly *had* to see it, denying that Lucius would have let Draco go through with it.

Pulling his arm out of the sling, he grabbed Draco's wrist with his left hand and pushed up his sleeves with his right. But as he exposed the Dark Mark burned onto Draco's inner forearm, Draco jerked away cradling his arm.

"Damn it," said Harry. "Damn him."

Draco stared at him, his eyes wide.

"What?" snapped Harry.

"You touched it," said Draco a little breathlessly.

"So."

"So," said Draco. "It burned."

"What?" said Harry, confused now.

"Harry," said Draco. "You set it off."

"What are you talking about?"

"You touched it and it went off," said Draco.

"That's impossible."

"Is it?" said Draco.

Harry stared at him. "Oh, God, no," said Harry. "It can't-" Harry backed away. "No. I won't believe it."

"Harry," said Draco, seeing his distress. "It's not your fault." Draco looked down at his arm, the mark a dark black. "I bet the Death Eaters are all apparating to the Master now. It's not going to take him long to figure out what happened."

As if on cue, pain exploded in Harry's head. Both hands hit his forehead and he hit his knees.

Harry felt Draco's hand on his shoulder and looked up. The anger and shame in his expression was replaced with concern and sympathy.

"Come on," said Draco, helping Harry up. "We may as well get it over with."

Harry nodded clasped a hand over Draco's on his arm.

*What a nightmare.*

They both stared at the fire for a minute but they could hear the noise behind them in the compound. They shared a look of apprehension and turned around. The number of Death Eaters in the clearing was overwhelming. They all seemed to be muttering to each other, looking puzzled.

When Voldemort spotted the boys, he held up his hand for quiet. In the silence the Death Eaters turned and saw Harry and they all lowered to one knee.

"Oh, God," muttered Harry.

"You can deal with this," Draco muttered back.

Voldemort approached them, Lucius was with him and they stopped just outside the flinch zone.

Lucius lowered to his knee and Draco followed suit.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort, looking more pleased than ever.

Harry simply inclined his head in greeting.

"You may rise, Draco," said Voldemort. "You also, Lucius." As the Malfoys stood, Voldemort turned back to Harry. "Do you have something to tell me, Harry?"

"Is there something *you* forgot to tell *me*?" said Harry pointedly.

Voldemort smiled. "Well it was a bit sudden," said Voldemort. "So I may not have had the opportunity to tell you that Draco was Initiated as a Death Eater yesterday."

"And why was it so sudden?" said Harry. "And why wasn't he allowed to tell me?"

Voldemort sighed patiently. "I didn't think Death Eater Initiations would interest you."

"They don't," said Harry. "But Draco is my friend and-"

"Yes," said Voldemort. "I know how close you have become and-"

"If this is because of me-"

"Harry, you are skirting the issue at hand," said Voldemort.

"What issue," said Harry, hoping against hope he could drop it, but knowing Voldemort wouldn't let him.

"I take it, you have discovered that Draco now bears the Dark Mark," said Voldemort.



"Yes," said Harry. "I found out by accident," he added to exonerate Draco, "about ten minutes ago."

"Ah," said Voldemort. "Then maybe you can explain to me why about ten minutes ago all my Death Eaters started apparating to me wondering why I called them."

Harry stared at him stubbornly, still trying to deny it.

"I know / didn't call them," said Voldemort. "That raises the question of who did. More pointedly, who else *could*."

Harry remained silent, even as Voldemort reached out his hand. He took hold of Harry's face and Harry sank to his knees.

"See how stubborn he is," said Voldemort but he was still smiling. He turned his head to look at Draco. "Any ideas, Draco?"

Draco started stammering but Voldemort held up his hand.

"Draco," said Voldemort, looking serious now. "Did Harry touch the Dark Mark on your arm?"

Draco began an explanation but Voldemort held up his free hand.

"A simple yes or no will suffice."

Draco looked at the ground. "Yes."

Voldemort released Harry's face and Harry slumped to his hand, pressing the other to his scar. Voldemort turned to Draco and took his face, holding up his chin so Voldemort could see his expression.

"Why so distraught, Draco?" said Voldemort.

Draco didn't look away from Voldemort's steady gaze.

"Because it did not please him," said Draco. "And what displeases him, displeases you. He is your son."

Harry pushed himself to his feet and wanted to kick Draco for that statement but then realized that Draco had actually just challenged Voldemort on Harry's behalf.

Voldemort laughed. "Well said, Draco, my boy. Well said." He let go of Draco's face and turned to Lucius. "Your son is indeed clever, Lucius. He is a credit to you and an asset to me."

Lucius only inclined his head.

"But," said Voldemort, again to Draco. "The fact is, it does indeed please me because I know it will please Harry," he turned to Harry, "once he stops being so stubborn." Without releasing Harry gaze (or glare as it were), Voldemort said, "Lucius, hold out your arm."

Lucius pulled up his sleeve and held out his arm.

"Show me, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry glanced down at the Dark Mark on Lucius' arm then at his face, which was inscrutable, then back at Voldemort.

"Will you make me?" said Harry.

Voldemort shook his head. "No, Harry. But why do you argue with me over such a moot test?"

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Voldemort was right. Everyone there knew. With a brief glance at Draco, who was looking at his father, Harry reached out and touched the Dark Mark on Lucius' arm.

Everyone in the compound grabbed their arms.

Voldemort laughed.

"Thank you, Harry," said Voldemort. He turned to the Death Eaters. "As you have all been witnesses to, Harry now has control over the Dark Mark. I advise you all to remember that. You may all return to your posts."

As the Death Eaters started to disappear, Voldemort turned to Harry.

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry. "I know. You're pleased."

Voldemort chuckled. "Ah, but Harry," said Voldemort. "Now we have another connection. I can test you in a different way."

*Great.* "Oh," said Harry.

"You can control the Death Eaters through pain and pleasure now," said Voldemort.

Harry opened his mouth but Voldemort held up his hand.

"But I will not teach you that because I'm sure you don't want to know."

"But," said Harry nervously.

Voldemort turned to Draco. "Give me your arm."

Draco pulled up his sleeve and Lucius hit his knees.

"No, Master," said Lucius. "I beg you."

"Quiet, Lucius," said Voldemort. "Draco will not be punished."

Voldemort touched the edge of the Dark Mark on Draco's arm and Draco's eyes closed.

"Voldemort," said Harry with concern.

"It's all right, Harry," said Voldemort, not taking his eyes off Draco. "I assure you, I'm not hurting him."

Lucius stood up and moved around them to stand beside Harry. They both watched Draco. Harry was fascinated as the air around Draco started to flicker with light.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered to Lucius.

"That's a visual ethereal appearance of Draco's magic," said Lucius quietly.

"That's Draco's physical magic?" said Harry.

"Yes. Enhanced by Lord Voldemort's," said Lucius. "The power flowing through Draco right now is extraordinary."

"Does it hurt?"

"No, Master Harry," said Lucius. "This is a reward. The intense magical sharing results in an almost sexual feeling of pleasure."

"Really," whispered Harry.

"Yes."

Harry looked down at Voldemort's hand. His grip was around Draco's arm while his thumb slowly ran a circle around the skull imprinted on Draco's arm. Then he looked up at Draco's face. His eyes were still closed, his mouth was slightly opened.

*"Apportion,"* said Voldemort.

Harry looked over at him just as Voldemort's hand touched Harry's face.

Harry almost crumpled at the surge of power he was hit with. He could feel it physically running over his body, racing through his blood, coursing over his skin.

"My God," he heard Lucius gasp.

Harry felt no pain but magic enveloped him. He felt Voldemort's fingers circle his scar and the intensity increased.

Harry was wrapped in warmth and joy and love, like a blanket. He was protected from everything even remotely sad. No dark, no light, only energy. He never wanted it to end.

Voldemort's finger touched his scar and Harry's soul felt like it had exploded once again, but this time it wasn't in pain. The feelings that

hit Harry were more like ecstasy almost euphoric and Harry hit the ground, gasping for breath.

"Did you see it, Lucius," Harry heard Voldemort rasp.

"Yes, Master," said Lucius. "Astonishing."

"Yes," said Voldemort, sounding very pleased. "Harry is ready."

Harry didn't like the sound of *that*. He turned his head. Draco was also on the ground. Harry wondered what he had felt.

*Well that was weird*, thought Harry.

*Damn right*. Was echoed in his head.

But it wasn't Harry's thought. In fact, it had sounded like -

Harry turned to look at Draco again. Draco was staring back at him.

*You can hear me?* Harry heard Draco's voice in his head. *Can't you?*

Harry blinked at him. His jaw dropped open.

*It's a nightmare*, thought Harry. *That's it. Just another nightmare.*

Harry saw Draco close his eyes.

*Bloody hell, Harry. Couldn't you keep me out of your bloody nightmares.*

*Great, more guilt.*

Harry could almost feel Draco's smirk.

## Chapter 15

### The Gift

"It's mild telepathy," Voldemort had told them. "You will learn to control it."

"But—"

"Harry," Voldemort interrupted him. "The spell I used to test your magic made you share your magic and visa versa with Draco. One of the possible side effects is telepathy. I'm very pleased with the results, so don't be alarmed. You and Draco have already become close, this is only a mild inconvenience."

"But—"

"Your internal magic is so strong that it latched onto his, bonding his magic to you," said Voldemort.

"But—"

"Harry," said Voldemort.

*Shut up, Harry. You're trying his patience.*

Harry sent Draco a glare.

"Voldemort—"

"Go back to school, Harry," said Voldemort. "You will both learn how to control this gift."

They did indeed learn how to control the *gift* after a couple of weeks but it was a strange, disturbing couple of weeks while they learned how.

Hearing some of Draco's random thoughts those first few days was very interesting.

*Crabbe, you can't be that stupid.*

*Just wait, Blaise. You'll get yours.*

And Harry's favorite:

*Oh, I wish Harry was here to see that.*

And while Harry had been noble enough not to respond to any of those comments, Draco wasn't so generous.

*I don't want to talk about it.*

Had been Harry's thought while talking to Ron.

*Talk about what?*

*Nothing, Draco.*

Harry could almost hear him snort.

*Don't give me that crap, Harry.*

*I wasn't talking to you.*

*Yeah you were.*

*Excuse me for living.* Harry shut off his thoughts after that. He had learned quickly how to close Draco out of his mind, something that bugged Draco to no end.

It wasn't until a week later that they found out how to use the gift rather than be trapped by it.

Harry was frantically trying to explain the telepathy thing to Ron during potions.

"Potter!" said Snape with annoyance.

Harry looked up with alarm. Severus had his *you're in trouble* look on his face.

"Professor?" said Harry.

“Since you obviously have time to talk, you can detail the list of ingredients needed for the potion we’re making.”

“Er, which potion is that?” said Harry.

Snape smirked at him. Harry sighed. It didn’t seem to matter what their relationship was outside school, the potions Master thrived on being able to catch Harry off guard.

“The Restricting Potion,” said Snape, lifting his eyebrows expectantly.

“Oh, right,” said Harry. “Um-“

That was when Draco started feeding him the information.

*Knotgrass.*

”Knotgrass,” said Harry.

*Shredded boomslang skin.*

“Shredded boomslang skin,” said Harry.

Harry went on with the list Draco was telling him as Snape’s frown got worse.

*And a partridge in a pear tree.*

“And a-“Harry cut himself off.

“And a what?” said Snape.

“And I think that’s it,” said Harry.

“Yes. Very good, Potter,” said Snape.

“What? No points?” said Ron.

Snape turned a glare to Ron. “Points for paying attention to the lesson, Weasley?” said Snape.

Ron instantly got contrite. “You’re right, Professor. Sorry.”



Snape blinked at him. "Very good, Weasley. I won't take off points for your outburst then," said Snape. "Although I should."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said Ron.

Harry heard Draco's laughter in his head.

*Damn, if Weasley isn't learning.*

Harry fought his own laugh. *I'm sure he'll be glad to know you think so.*

Draco sobered. *You wouldn't.*

*Maybe.*

*Harry-*

*Oh, never mind. And, by the way – thanks.*

*Next time pay attention.*

*Yeah, yeah. And a partridge in a pear tree.*

Draco laughed out loud and the class looked at him.

"Something funny, Mr. Malfoy?" said Snape who suddenly turned and looked at Harry.

Harry wondered if Snape knew about the gift. If he did then he would know what had just happened.

"No," said Draco, looking down into his caldron and turning red. "Sorry."

That's a lovely shade of red-

*Shut up, Harry!*

Harry snorted to himself.

The next occasion was in Care of Magical Creatures.

Harry was pretty sure that Draco was involved in some flirtation with Pansy. What he saw in the girl was beyond Harry, but who was Harry to judge.

"Malfoy," said Hagrid. "Y'r up."

Draco turned and looked around, confused. *Oh, shit.*

"Come along, Malfoy," said Hagrid with a glare.

*Just go, Draco.*

Draco moved toward the paddock. *What the hell am I doing?*

*You're going to act subservient.*

Me? A Malfoy?

Why was Harry not surprised. *Do you want to get mauled again, like the hippogriff?*

*Not especially.*

*Then listen to me.*

*All right.*

Harry talked him through the steps to get close to the Griffin and much to Hagrid's delight, the Griffin let Draco get on it. They took a cantor around the paddock.

"Well done, Malfoy," cried Hagrid. "Well done."

As Draco slid off the beast, grinning, he stroked it's head and the thing actually nuzzled his hand.

"Beautiful thing, aren't you?" said Draco.

The beast whimpered and sighed then fell to it's knees before Draco.

Oh, sure. Milk it for all it's worth. Can I help it if I'm irresistible?

Hagrid was almost crying.

“Malfoy, that’s incredible,” said Hagrid. “Not many Griffin’s fall docile to a wizard.”

Draco sent an arrogant grin to the Slytherins but when he turned back to the Griffin, his expression was one of appreciation again. Again the beast nuzzled Draco’s hand.

*I like him.*

Harry laughed. *It’s a her, you git, and obviously she likes you too.*

The Griffin turned suddenly and looked directly at Harry. She stood up.

Hagrid noticed and smiled. “Come on then, Harry.”

“No. I don’t think so,” said Harry cautiously.

*Come on you coward.*

*Me? A coward?*

*Just get your arse in here.*

*No. Look at it.*

Since the beast had been turning it’s head at every thought, Harry figured it out.

*She knows we’re talking.*

“Go on, Harry,” said Hagrid.

Harry didn’t want to disappoint Hagrid so he climbed the fence and went over to the Griffin by Draco. The Griffin instantly fell to her knees.

*You must be getting sick of that by now.*

*Shut up, Draco.*

The only real problem with the 'gift' was fencing. Harry's arm was well on the mend but it wasn't his arm that was the problem. It was the 'gift.' They had both cut each other rather badly on several occasions before being able to block their intentions from the other.

Madam Pomfrey was frustrated because they couldn't tell her what the problem was (they hadn't told anyone the extent of the 'gift'). After weeks of sparring they were now carrying each other in to the infirmary all bloody.

This last incident, Harry had to literally carry Draco into the hospital with a nasty slice across his stomach, was severe enough that Dumbledore was called.

Pomfrey healed Draco quickly enough but Harry was distraught.

Dumbledore took Harry aside into Madam Pomfrey's office while Draco was being mended. Harry was a little unnerved not knowing how much Dumbledore knew.

He sat down nervously as Dumbledore leaned against Pomfrey's desk.

"I know you and Draco have become close," Dumbledore began. "Indeed almost as close as you and Hermione and Ron."

"It's different," said Harry. "He understands what I'm going through in ways the others don't."

"I know, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I am also aware that Voldemort has marked him."

Alarmed, Harry sat up. "It wasn't his fault," said Harry. "He didn't want-"

"I know that too, Harry. I know what Draco's been forced to do," said Dumbledore. "He is allowed certain allowances because he is needed," Dumbledore met Harry's gaze, "by you."

"Me?"

“Yes. To keep you from becoming too dependant on Voldemort.”

Harry was about to argue that he thought it was too late for that but then realized it wasn't. When Draco was at the compound...

“I don't feel so alone.”

“Yes, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “So what happened?”

“I set it off,” mumbled Harry.

Dumbledore straightened. “You what?”

Harry glanced up at the old wizard. “I didn't believe Lucius would allow it to happen, so I had to see it. I pushed up Draco's sleeve and I accidentally touched it.”

“And it went off?”

“Yes.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore very slowly. “You activated the Dark Mark?”

“Er, yes,” said Harry.

“I take it Voldemort was pleased.”

“To say the least.”

“And,” prompted Dumbledore.

“Well, he figured out, since I'm now connected to the Dark Mark, that he had a different means of judging my powers.”

“Hm, yes,” said Dumbledore. “It is a Dark spell.”

“It doesn't hurt,” Harry felt compelled to say.

“I dare say. Quite the opposite, I've been told,” said Dumbledore, eyes sparkling again. “But if held for too long or if one is very powerful, it could have side effects.”

"I know," said Harry softly.

"What did Voldemort say?"

"Well he told Lucius that I was ready."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. Harry was starting to hate when he did that.

"And – well – Draco and I are telepathically connected."

"Telepathy?" said Dumbledore with surprise.

Harry looked up again. "Is that bad?" said Harry.

Dumbledore sighed with open relief. "No, Harry. That is good, actually. Quite good."

"What does it mean?"

"It means, my boy, that you were correct in thinking that Draco was forced," said Dumbledore. "Had Draco, or you, actually have turned, the spell would have effected him differently. The sharing of magic would have been uneven. If he had turned, you would have felt the Dark in him and shut him out. If you had turned you would have simply taken him. Either way, the result would have been that Draco would have been yours to command."

"What–"

"Harry, the sharing of magic was equal, hence the telepathy," said Dumbledore. "My guess is that Voldemort was testing Draco to see where his loyalties are. If he was pleased, it's obvious that he wants Draco to be loyal to you."

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "Are you saying Voldemort was trying to give Draco to me?"

"Fundamentally," said Dumbledore. "Yes."

"Fundamentally?" Sometimes Dumbledore was as bad as Voldemort.  
"What–"

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Voldemort wants you to be happy while you are with him. He has been trying to create as much as a home environment for you as he can.”

Harry nodded mutely.

Dumbledore went on. “And now it seems that Voldemort has implanted Draco as a brother figure for you.”

Harry smirked at that, although when he thought about it, they had covered the realm of what Harry could believe brothers went through. He had seen it within the Weasley family. The rivalry, the competition, the pranks (although he doubted most brothers went through the motions with the animosity that Draco and Harry had had).

Whether or not Draco had this so called loyalty was something that Harry would have to see to believe.

“The more the Ministry tries to take from you, the more Voldemort tries to provide. What that entails is family.”

When Harry thought about it, he had too concede that point. Harry had become far too comfortable at the compound because of that very reason. He could relax. He felt perfectly at ease.

Most of his time lately had been spent with Death Eaters. And they had taken him in.

All Harry ever wanted was a family. And Voldemort was providing it.

*Great.*

Harry’s gaze shot up. “Where’s Sirius?” Harry demanded. Sirius was Harry’s family. His true family. “Where did you send him?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have no idea where Sirius has been sent presently.”

Harry was afraid he believed him. Had the Ministry taken Sirius from him too?

## Chapter 16

### The Duel and the Demonstration

After everything Dumbledore said, Harry asked Hermione to look into magical sharing and telepathy. While she couldn't get much information on magical sharing ('Harry, that's Dark Magic. It's in the Restricted section.') she was able to find out some stuff on telepathy.

After lunch, they waited beside the Gryffindor table waiting for most of the students to file out before they headed out to Care of Magical Creatures. Harry called Draco over to them.

Ron was very interested in the sharing magic although he had almost blown a gasket over the telepathy. Harry finally redirected Ron's thoughts back to the physical sharing of magic.

"Did you get to feel Voldemort's power?" said Ron.

"I'm not sure," said Harry.

"No," said Draco. "My father said it was a test of your powers, that was all you, Harry, and a test of me. Voldemort was only the conduit between us to link the Dark Mark and your scar."

"So Dumbledore was right," said Harry. "He was testing your loyalty."

"I guess," said Draco with a shrug but he didn't meet Harry gaze.

"So why was he so pleased that you weren't loyal to him?"

Draco rolled his eyes.

"I know I'm pathetic," said Harry. "Explain it to me anyway."

"Obviously because I showed loyalty to you and considering he calls you his son, it's just as good."

"You?" said Ron with a sneer at Draco. "Loyal to Harry?"



Draco turned on him. "Are we going to have a problem here at this point, Weasley," Draco sneered back. "Or do I have to curse you until you're puking up slugs again."

Hermione stepped between them. "Look, there's no need for this," said Hermione. "I think we can all agree that Harry needs all the help he can get."

Ron's ears turned red. "Yeah, I'm sorry."

To give him credit, Draco dropped it and turned to Hermione.

"So, about this telepathy..."

"Right," said Hermione. "From what I read, you two share a Singularly Directed Telepathy."

"Meaning," said Harry.

"Meaning, it's only between you. You haven't got telepathy. You can only use it with each other."

"Well that was a no-brainer."

Hermione shot Draco a glare.

"Ok, sorry. Go on."

"The basics," said Hermione. "Since it's Singular Directed, distance doesn't matter. With regular telepathy you usually have to see someone. You two could be miles apart and it will work."

Harry nodded.

"You can't lie telepathically," said Hermione.

"Really," said Draco.

"Go ahead and try," she dared him.

*You-you, er,*

"You're stuttering, Draco," said Harry with a laugh.

Draco shrugged. "She's right though. You try."

Harry tried to tell Draco he thought he was rotten to the core but the thought came out *you're an arrogant Slytherin bastard*.

Draco snorted. "Well that's already been established."

"And you should be able to hear voice inflections and the emotion of the thought."

They both agreed that they could.

The black owl soared into the great Hall forestalled their discussion. Harry sent Draco a glance and lifted his arm as Voldemort's owl flew to him and settled on it.

Harry took off the note, gave him an owl treat and he left.

Harry didn't open the note until they were outside. Then he read it out loud.

*Harry, my son,*

Harry made a frustrated gesture and rolled his eyes.

"Give it up," said Draco. "He's going to call you that and refer to you that way until he is dead. To him you *are* his son."

"I know," muttered Harry looking back down at the note. *Scary thing is sometimes I feel like I am.*

*I know Harry but you still have time. Enjoy it while you can.*

Harry nodded, ignoring Ron and Hermione who had glanced back and forth between them, and continued with the letter.

*The ministry has imposed the same requirements for Hogwarts over the Easter break so you will be able to come home again. In honor of this, I have arranged that the duel you requested will occur the second day of the break.*

*I hope this pleases you because Terrance was most upset by the command that he duel with Lucius. His only consolation was that you have agreed to see if he has anything to teach you.*

*I will see you next week, my son, and if any of your friends wish to come to the duel, let me know and I will arrange it.*

“Cool, we can go?” said Ron.

“I guess,” said Harry. “If you want too.”

“I do,” said Hermione.

“Me too,” said Ron.

“I don’t know how he can arrange it though,” said Harry.

But he did.

There was a vast excitement in the compound as they waited for the fencers to take the field. Many Death Eaters were there for the event and Harry’s friend’s presence didn’t seem to bother them because none of them wore their masks.

Ginger who had decided to come, stood at Harry’s left between Harry and Voldemort’s chair. Draco was on Harry right. Ron and Hermione were on the other side of Voldemort’s chair whispering to each other.

Lucius had asked if he could warm up with Harry before the duel and Voldemort had told him no, so he had sparred with Draco.

Harry didn’t under why and had asked Voldemort why.

Voldemort had replied that to keep it fair, Harry would have had to warm up with Vandewater too. But Harry had a feeling it was more than that.

“Is your arm strong enough for that, yet?” Voldemort had said.

Since Harry’s arm was almost 100%, he said his arm was fine but he conceded Voldemort’s point simply because he didn’t want to spend any more time with Vandewater than he had too.

Voldemort probably knew this because he chuckled.

The duelers took the field and saluted the masters first then each other.

Harry watched engrossed. Lucius was always captivating to see but it appeared that Vandewater was indeed a Natural as well. He was a marvel to watch from that perspective.

*I beat that?*

*You certainly did.*

Harry sent Draco a glance and he nodded.

The duel continued until ultimately Voldemort called a stop to it, calling it a draw, which both men, sweating and out of breath accepted.

But the next day, in the fencing tent for Harry's first lesson with Vandewater, Vandewater smugly told Harry that he had let Lucius draw with him.

Harry didn't believe him though because Vandewater looked as wiped out as Lucius but he let it drop. He didn't feel like pointing out that Lucius could've outlasted Vandewater if Voldemort had let the match continue. Harry doubted Vandewater would have acknowledged the point.

"So what are you going to teach me?" said Harry.

"How is your arm?" said Vandewater.

"Pretty good. About 98%."

Vandewater nodded. "First we will warm up."

Vandewater appeared a little surprised as he watched Sennie re-enter the hilt of Harry's sword.

"He's chosen to serve me," said Harry with a shrug as he picked up the sword.

Vandewater smiled, an odd sort of smile. "Your persona, like the masters, inspires loyalty," said Vandewater.

They sparred for a few minutes in silence then they dueled and once again Harry disarmed the man.

"I admit," said Vandewater as he retrieved his sword. "Lucius did indeed teach you well."

"He did," agreed Harry.

"But with your Natural abilities and your internal magic being so powerful, it's no wonder you are a phenomenal fencer."

Harry shrugged. "Thanks," said Harry softly.

"And you are right. Lucius is better qualified to teach you left handed fencing," said Vandewater. "You do not need any more training."

Harry was a bit surprised at how subdued the man sounded. He hung his sword up on the wall as Sennie came out and wound around his arm. "I don't think Lucius is allowed to fence with me anymore," said Harry without thinking.

"Oh?"

Harry shrugged again then felt a hand at his jaw as his face was held up.

"I see," said Vandewater. "He's that possessive is he?"

Harry tried to pull his face away but couldn't. He stared at Vandewater as his eyes moved over Harry's face in an inspecting sort of way. The weird smile pulled across his lips again.

Harry felt the burn on his head and just waited.

"Terrance," said Voldemort in a tone that didn't bode well for the man.

Vandewater let of Harry instantly and gave a curt bow.

"There is nothing more to teach the boy, master."

Voldemort approached Harry and raised a hand to his face. Harry endured the pain as Voldemort ran his knuckles down his cheek.

"Are you alright, Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry nodded. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Voldemort dropped his hand. "Why indeed." He turned to Vandewater. "Touch my son again Terrance and I will kill you."

"That's a little extreme, isn't it Voldemort?" said Harry.

"I don't think so."

"Master, I wouldn't dare-"

"Silence, Terrance," said Voldemort. "Harry leave us."

Harry sighed and moved toward the door.

"After dinner," Voldemort told him, "there will be a demonstration."

Harry stopped and turned back to Voldemort. "Oh?" said Harry. "Dare I ask?"

Voldemort chuckled. "It's a surprise, Harry. You will enjoy it."

Harry nodded and ducked out of the tent. He wasn't two steps when he heard Voldemort's soft voice and Vandewater's scream.

*Great. More guilt.*

What happened?

Harry looked around and spotted Draco and Lucius at a table with Avery. Nearly the whole compound was looking toward the tent curiously, hearing Vandewater's screams from it.

Harry walked over to the small round table where the men sat enjoying some refreshments and helped himself to a butterbeer.

"What happened?" said Draco aloud as Harry sat down.

Harry shrugged. "He touched me."

Both Lucius and Avery choked. Avery almost dropped his glass.

"He didn't?" said Lucius.

"He wouldn't dare," said Avery.

Harry looked back and forth between them, his confusion growing. Was that such a crime? Severus and Lucius had touched Harry plenty of times. *No one touches the boy but me* Voldemort had told his Death Eaters but that was in regards to his protection.

"What-"

Avery cut him off. "Where did he touch you?"

Harry blinked at him. "He grabbed my face," said Harry, sending Lucius a glance. "The same way Voldemort always does."

Both men groaned and Harry stared at them in confusion.

"What did he do?"

"He just looked at me," said Harry with growing frustration. "Why? Just what-"

"And the Master came in then?" said Lucius.

"Yes," said Harry. He glanced at Draco who looked as confused as Harry felt.

Another scream came from the fencing tent.

What is going on, Draco?

*I have no idea.*

All three of them got up from their chairs and Harry felt Voldemort approach. Harry watched him move around the table until he stopped and turned to face Harry. Harry looked at him expecting some sort of explanation.

"He won't bother you again," said Voldemort.

It wasn't what Harry was expecting. "Bother me," he echoed curiously.

Voldemort looked at the Death Eaters around the table. "You didn't tell him?" said Voldemort.

"Tell me what?"

"No, my lord," said Lucius.

Voldemort sighed. "Harry, come with me. I need to speak with you."

Harry's curiosity was burning now. He grabbed his bottle and as an after thought grabbed another one (he had a feeling he was going to need it) and followed Voldemort to his tent. Once inside, Voldemort settled into his chair behind his desk and Harry set his bottles on the table next to the chair he always used.

Without thinking, Harry moved to the dry sink and poured a glass of brandy and set it on the desk in front of Voldemort. Harry had seen Severus and Lucius do it hundreds of times.

Voldemort noted the action and waited until Harry sat down, his bottle in his hand, his elbows on his knees as he sat forward.

"Thank you, Harry," said Voldemort, picking up the glass and taking a sip. "But I have house-elves who-"

"I didn't want the interruption," said Harry. "Are you going to tell me what the problem is?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "You see, Terrance Vandewater has some unique characteristics that have served my purposes in the past."

"I guess the ability to impale people with a four foot sword might come in handy for an evil Dark Lord."

Voldemort laughed. "Oh, Harry. You have no idea. But, yes, there is that. He is also quite sadistic."



“Ah, blood and pain,” said Harry. “He must be a joy to watch.”

Voldemort chuckled at Harry’s sarcasm. “On occasion.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and started on his second butterbeer. “Voldemort,” said Harry, looking up at him. “Can’t you just tell me.”

“Very well, Harry,” said Voldemort, holding his gaze. “Terrance enjoys young men.”

“He what?”

“I doubt there are any of his students who haven’t been – what was your term – impaled by his sword.”

Harry jaw dropped open as he got it.

“The more talented the boy, the more worthy to be counted among Terrance’s conquests,” said Voldemort. “I dare say, he must have been drooling over you.”

Harry stood up, staring at Voldemort in disbelief.

Voldemort took a sip of his drink and looked back at Harry. “If I hadn’t come in,” said Voldemort. “There is no saying what he may have tried to do.”

“You left me alone with him?” For some reason, Harry felt hurt.

“That was unintentional, Harry,” said Voldemort very seriously. “I came as soon as I heard he had defied my wishes. He has been punished. However, I will kill him if you wish me to.”

Harry could only blink.

“But Harry,” said Voldemort. “You must remember that you are not helpless anymore. One uttered curse from you would have crippled him.

“This is something that my Death Eaters need reminding,” Voldemort went on. “They look at you and see your youth and your lean agile stature. After tonight’s demonstration, they will see your power.”

For his life, Harry couldn’t think of anything to say, in fact, he didn’t even know what to think. He stared at the front of Voldemort’s desk wondering if he was almost out of time.

He felt the burn and looked up. Voldemort’s hand came up and raised Harry’s chin so he could search Harry’s expression. Voldemort frowned.

Apparently Harry’s expression was as blank as his mind was. He met Voldemort’s red gaze.

“What are you thinking, Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry’s head was pounding again. “My life is a nightmare,” said Harry softly.

Voldemort sighed. “Always the cynic,” said Voldemort. “But I assure you, my son, your nightmare will end.”

Harry pulled his face away and turned. “I know,” said Harry.

He felt Voldemort’s eyes on him as he moved toward the door.

“Harry,” said Voldemort. Harry stopped walking but didn’t turn around. “I said your nightmare, not your life.”

“What’s the difference,” muttered Harry and he left the tent.

Harry couldn’t even begin to speculate how many Death Eaters were in the compound presently. The only sound to be heard was Voldemort’s voice as he addressed them. Harry stood off to the side with Draco desperately trying to tune out Voldemort’s speech. The primary theme of the speech seemed to be the culmination of his power and the fruition of years of planning. Ultimately that it was almost time.

Frankly, Harry just didn’t want to hear it.

Draco had been thoroughly scandalized and disgusted when Harry had told him about Vandewater but he seemed far more interested in the upcoming demonstration than Harry would have thought.

“Harry,” Draco had said, “This is obviously important. Look at the build up he’s been giving it.”

“It’s probably a test,” Harry had responded.

“Yes. And important enough to have almost every damned Death Eater here to witness it.”

Harry had given up trying to talk to Draco after that. While Draco remained at Harry’s side, sending him concerned glances, Harry could tell he was still too interested in the proceedings to be any comfort.

“Harry, my son,” said Voldemort, raising a beckoning hand. “Join me.”

Harry stepped towards him hesitantly.

“With this demonstration,” Voldemort told his Death Eaters. “I will show you all just what Harry is capable of and what to expect.”

“Voldemort,” said Harry cautiously.

“It will be fun, Harry,” said Voldemort as Harry stepped up to him. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Is that a trick question?”

Voldemort chuckled. “Harry, I’m just going to show them your power,” said Voldemort and he paused succinctly. “And allow you to feel mine.”

Harry’s gaze shot up to meet Voldemort’s. “Really?” said Harry, skeptical and curious at the same time. “Can you do that?”

“Curious, Harry?” said Voldemort with a knowing grin. “But yes. I can.” He glanced to his Death Eaters. “Now, who shall I honor? Who is worthy to make the connection between me and my son?”

“Voldemort?”

Voldemort looked back to Harry. “I have to make the connection first, Harry, between the Dark Mark and your scar.” He raised a brow. “Unless you want it to hurt?”

Harry stared at him. “Not particularly.”

Voldemort grinned and turned back to scan his Death Eaters. He moved among them considering each face.

“Couldn’t you simply use Draco again?” suggested Harry.

“I could,” said Voldemort. “But I don’t think he could take another blast of that kind of power.” He turned to Harry. “You wouldn’t want to hurt him, would you?”

“Of course not,” said Harry.

Voldemort continued his survey. Each of the Death Eaters looked hopeful as Voldemort considered them as if it were indeed a great honor. He stopped before Snape.

“Severus, I have not rewarded you for your constant help tending my son.”

Severus had lowered to his knees when he had gained Voldemort’s direct attention. “It’s not necessary, my lord,” said Severus. “It-“

Voldemort waved his hand. “Of course,” said Voldemort. “But I chose you anyway.”

“Master, you honor me.”

“Yes, yes. Do come along.”

The two joined Harry in the center of the circle and Harry looked warily at Severus. Voldemort was smiling with anticipation and Harry felt a shudder run through him.

“Now what?” said Harry.

“Severus, hold out your arm,” said Voldemort. Severus did, uncovering the Dark Mark. “First, you will activate the Dark Mark,” Voldemort told Harry.

“Me?” said Harry. “That’s not-“

“This is a little different from the last time,” said Voldemort.

“But won’t everyone feel it?” said Harry.

Voldemort nodded. “Briefly, yes. They will feel it until I use my spell.”

Harry glanced at Severus who only nodded. He sighed and reached out his hand. Wrapping his hand around Severus’ arm, he pressed his thumb on the mark.

Every Death Eater gasped and grabbed their arms.

Harry’s scar began to throb as Voldemort raised a hand to Harry’s face. The fingers gently opened against his cheek and the pain grew.

“*Apporton*,” said Voldemort and the pain was instantly replaced by the same surge of power Harry had felt the last time.

He immediately tensed up.

“Relax, Harry.” Voldemort’s voice was soft and very close.

The magic flowed around him again, through him.

Voldemort’s hand moved up Harry’s face toward his scar.

“Harry, look at me.”

Harry opened his eyes and met Voldemort’s gaze.

“Are you ready, Harry?” Harry could only nod. “You need only look at me and say the spell. *Apporton*, Harry. Do you understand?”

Harry swallowed hard, unsure if he wanted to go through with this now. But would he really be able to feel Voldemort’s magic? Damn his curiosity.

“Apporton,” whispered Harry.

Severus cried out, pulling his arm out of Harry’s grasp and falling to the ground.

Harry almost hit his knees himself. His hand grasped Voldemort’s shoulder, clutching it to remain standing.

It felt, looked different. Shadows swallowed up the warmth only to be invaded by contrasting colors. A bright light emerged from the darkness. A black cloud fell over a rainbow hue.

There was a buzz of voices around them.

“Severus, are you alright?” Lucius’ voice.

“Yes.” Both Lucius and Severus stopped another Death Eater from approaching. “Don’t go near them. Can you feel it?”

“Do you see it?”

“Astonishing.”

Harry could only stare into Voldemort’s eyes. They glowed with satisfaction, reflecting the swirls of color which wafted around them. For a moment Harry thought they might lift off the ground like they had in the graveyard.

Such awesome power. How could anyone stop Voldemort with this at his command?

Voldemort’s fingers approached Harry scar.

*You are the only one who can destroy me.*

*But I’m not ready.*

What I need is...

“More power.”

## Chapter 17

### Voldemort's Options

Harry hit the ground at the surge of power that hit him but he felt no pain. He pushed himself to his feet and took stock. Staring at his hands, which were tingling with a muted sensation of pins and needles he realized...

"It worked," said Harry softly.

He looked at Voldemort who was on his knees and looking up at Harry with wide incredulous eyes. Harry couldn't help his grin.

Lucius moved towards Voldemort to help him up, but Harry stopped him.

"No, don't touch him," said Harry. He looked back at Voldemort. "How's it feel?"

"What did you do?" said Severus.

Harry squatted down before Voldemort at the flinch point and looked at him with a smile. "I took his power," said Harry. "Just like he used to steal mine and it drained him." Meeting those red eyes, that looked merely curious, he continued, "bet you'd love to get your hands on me now."

Voldemort actually grinned. "No, Harry."

"Oh? Why?" said Harry curiously.

"Because you look very pleased," said Voldemort. "What pleases you, pleases me, my son."

Harry smirked at him. "I could kill you right now, you know," said Harry.

Voldemort nodded. "I don't think you will."

"Why is that?" said Harry, smiling again. They had the Death Eaters' complete attention.

"I know your sense of honor, Harry," said Voldemort. "You won't curse a wizard who is down."

"Maybe," said Harry.

"I also know that you don't think you're ready."

"Maybe," said Harry again. "But that isn't why I won't."

"Tell me, Harry," said Voldemort with a knowing grin.

"Because I don't think you're done teaching me yet."

Voldemort chuckled softly. "Very good, Harry."

Harry stood up and glanced at Lucius. "Help him," said Harry.

Lucius helped Voldemort to his feet. Voldemort was still smiling.

"So how did you do it?" said Severus on Voldemort's other side.

Harry watched as Voldemort pulled his arms away from his Death Eaters then met his gaze.

"Anything I ask him, he will do," said Harry.

"You just asked him?" said Lucius with surprise.

"Yes."

Voldemort laughed with delight. "Ah, Harry. I have taught you well."

Then he did the unthinkable.

Stepping into the flinch zone, he took hold of Harry's head, pulled him forward and kissed his scar.

The world went instantly black.

Voldemort looked down at the 17 year old wizard unconscious at his feet then across the room at the one year old baby on the floor next to his dead mother.



“Are you going to kill him, my lord?” Voldemort heard Lucius behind him just as he had 16 years before.

Voldemort looked back down at the 17 year old boy, which Lucius didn't seem to see. He had a choice.

“You have a son, Lucius,” said Voldemort. “Do you not?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Lucius.

Voldemort smiled. “Bring him,” said Voldemort. “I will make him mine.”

Images, memories, sights, sounds flew around Voldemort's mind like fallen leaves on a blustery autumn day. Teaching Harry, scolding Harry, testing Harry, punishing Harry. But never touching Harry. Voldemort hadn't had the urge to, unlike before when his touch put Harry in agony and he desperately wanted to be able to touch his son without him feeling pain. Now he simply didn't want to.

The swirling stopped and Voldemort looked down.

A 17 year old wizard pushed to his hands and knees at Voldemort's feet.

“I'm sorry, father,” said Harry, breathing heavily.

Severus hit Harry with the Cruciatus Curse again and Harry hit the ground, screaming. He couldn't counter it.

“Maybe now, you'll do as you're told,” said Severus, raising his wand again.

Voldemort frowned and raised a hand. “That's enough, Severus,” said Voldemort.

He peered down at Harry as he tried to stop the shuddering of his body from the curse. This Harry had grown up spoiled and arrogant. The Dark Lord's only son. And although his powers were strong, they did not come close to those he had before Voldemort had chosen a different path.

This Harry was not so amusing either. Being raised amid Death Eaters through Voldemort's reign of terror, which continued because the boy had not stopped him, he had known only darkness and fear. Had seen murder and anarchy.

Voldemort bent down before the boy and he looked up. There was fear in those green eyes. He wasn't the brave boy who defied Voldemort with sarcasm and mockery. In fact, this boy went out of his way to please Voldemort. He wasn't the cynical pessimist who made Voldemort laugh.

Where was his curiosity, his perseverance?

Voldemort reached up and brushed away the black fringe over his eye. There was no scar – no connection.

This was not The Boy Who Lived. This was not *his* Harry. Frowning, Voldemort shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Harry. This will not do."

Voldemort reached out and again kissed his forehead where the scar should be.

In the house in Godric's Hollow, Voldemort found himself faced with the choice once again. 17 year old Harry was again unconscious at his feet and the baby was across the room.

"Are you going to kill him, my lord," said Lucius.

"No," said Voldemort. "Leave him."

"But–"

"Come, Lucius," said Voldemort. "I will deal with him later."

Again memories flew like a torrent within him. His reign, very boring with little to do but cause mayhem and hunt down The Boy Who Got Away.

Such sheer boredom. His only ambition was to right the mistake he had made in not killing little Harry Potter. Not that the boy was any threat to him. It was merely something to do.

Two Death Eaters approached, dragging a dark haired youth and they dumped him at Voldemort's feet.

"We finally caught him in Hogsmeade," said Lucius.

Harry pushed himself to his hands and knees and looked up at Voldemort with sheer terror in his eyes.

"What do you want?" he said with a voice that shook.

*I'm here, Voldemort. What do you want?* That other 15 year old wizard had said bravely as he clutched his Firebolt and his Invisibility Cloak. That boy had been forced to defend the Sorcerer's Stone (which Voldemort hadn't needed now) and he had faced the memory of Tom Riddle (But Voldemort still had that diary) and kill the Basilisk.

Voldemort lifted this boy's chin with a touch that didn't cause the boy pain. Although this boy had a certain strength from living with his Muggle relatives, he had faced none of the dangers which made Harry Potter famous. He was ordinary. Just the lucky boy who got away due to the Evil Dark Lord's whim.

Again, no scar, no connection.

This was not *his* Harry either.

Voldemort kissed his forehead and again came face to face with his choice.

"Are you going to kill him, my lord?" said Lucius.

"Oh, yes, Lucius," said Voldemort. "Yes. I must."

Voldemort raised his wand and cast the curse.

The world righted itself and Voldemort looked down at the 17 year old wizard again at his feet.

Harry pushed himself to his hands and knees and took a hoarse breath.

Voldemort waited breathlessly. Was this *his* Harry?

The boy looked up. The scar shown bright pink against his pale skin but it wasn't bleeding. His eyes were narrowed in wonder as he looked back at Voldemort.

"Well, that sucked," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry."

Memories almost smothered Harry as he tried to order them. What the hell had happened?

The memory of himself as an arrogant spoiled brat, hanging out with Draco and joking about Mudbloods started to fade.

Hogwarts had been closed. Harry had never met Ron or Hermione. He didn't play Quidditch, even if he did occasionally fly with Draco, his only real friend.

The memories of being Voldemort's son were slower to fade. The Death Eaters spoiled him, being Lord Voldemort's son, but Harry was scared to death of his father. Had wanted to please him, but somehow always fell short. And Voldemort never touched him – even though he could. He never laughed, never talked to Harry.

The memories of being The Lucky Potter Kid were almost painful. Only an average kid who never did a daring thing in his life because he was repressed by the Dursleys. He just existed in the shadow of his parents who had died.

And when he *had* finally come face to face with Voldemort, he had been so very afraid. Ready to beg for mercy...

Harry looked up as Voldemort bent to his level before him.

The red eyes glowed curiously and a hand reached out to hold his chin up.

“Well that sucked,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “Always the cynic, my Harry.”

He rose and Severus and Lucius helped him to his feet. Harry pressed a palm to his scar. It was still burning. He glanced at the hand. No blood.

“How much do you remember, Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry looked back at him. “Everything is fading,” said Harry. “What happened?”

“Choices, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Those were my options.”

Harry nodded.

“Do you understand why I had to curse you?”

Harry nodded again. “Yeah,” said Harry softly. “I didn’t like me much either.”

Voldemort chuckled again. “My cynic.”

“Not in those other worlds,” Harry challenged.

“Mm, no,” said Voldemort, raising a hand. He stopped although it looked as if the urge was there.

“What’s stopping you, Voldemort?” said Harry.

“You know it distresses me.”

“But all those other times you could, but you didn’t.”

“I didn’t want to,” said Voldemort.

“Why?”

“Harry, you should rest now,” said Voldemort. He dismissed his Death Eaters.

Harry waited for them to disperse, which they did, hesitant and curious.

“Why, Voldemort?” said Harry. Voldemort turned back to him. “I’m asking. Why?”

Voldemort reached up and let his fingers run down the side of Harry’s face. Harry endured it, challenging Voldemort with his gaze.

“Why?” said Harry softly.

“Because I didn’t care.”

Voldemort turned and strode away, leaving Harry alone in the middle of the compound.

Harry recalled Draco’s words.

*“You’ve gotten to him.”*

Did Voldemort care? Was he capable?

*This is too weird.*

*What’s weird?*

Harry knew it wouldn’t be long until he heard from Draco.

*Nothing, Draco. Go away.*

*Nothing, eh? Must be good. Tell me.*

Before he could stop the thought it came out.

*I think he cares.*

Harry heard the snort.

*‘Course he cares, you Pathetic Gryffindor Moron. I told you that. And it’s going to be his down fall.*

*So suddenly Draco Malfoy has all the answers?*

*Yup.*

*Care to clue me in?*

*Can't. Sorry. Choice is yours, my friend. I can only speculate.*

*Thanks a lot, Draco.*

*Well, if it's any consolation, I'll be there.*

Harry stopped walking half way to his tent.

*You will?*

He felt Draco struggling with his thought as if trying to be flippant or sarcastic. He failed.

*Yes, Harry. I'll be with you.*

*Thanks, Draco.*

Harry heard random thought about morons and tragic heroes and laughed as he entered his tent. At least he was getting an idea of who he could depend on when he was out of time.

It felt like his time was up a week later.

## Chapter 18

### The Choice

Ron and Harry laughed as they waited for their tea leaves to settle.

“Got your inner eye warmed up, Harry?” said Ron.

“Of course,” said Harry. Harry hadn’t dared tell Ron that he had actually had the dream similar to the one he had made up the beginning of term. Ron would have freaked.

Ron looked into his own cup. “Doesn’t look any different than it usually does,” said Ron.

Harry smiled and picked up his cup. He glanced into it then moved to hand it to Ron but quickly pulled it back. It had to be a trick of the eye due to Trelawney’s faulty lighting.

Harry looked back into it and turned it.

*No. It can’t be!*

But there was no mistaking the shape that sat in Harry’s cup. The Dark Mark.

“What is it, Harry?” said Ron.

“Problem, Mr. Potter,” said Trelawney as she approached their table. “Let me see.”

“No,” said Harry quickly and he magically shattered the cup in his hand.

“What did you see, my dear?” said Trelawney.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “I-I’ve got to go.” He pulled his stuff together.

“Mr. Potter.”

“I really have to go,” said Harry, heading for the trap door. When he reached it, it opened from the out side.



Professor McGonagall appeared.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Sybil" said McGonagall. "But the Headmaster wants to see Mr. Potter immediately."

"Of course, Minerva," said Trelawney.

Harry felt the blood draining from his face and glanced at Ron, who looked suddenly terrified.

"Why?" said Harry.

"He will tell you. Run along now," said McGonagall. "I'm sorry."

The apology made Harry's heart stop. He was compelled to look at Trelawney.

Trelawney sent him a sad sort of knowing look.

"Go on, dear," she said.

Without another word, Harry moved through the school to Dumbledore's office. The gargoyle wasn't blocking the entrance.

"Come in, Harry," called Dumbledore. "Sit down."

Harry went into the inner office and sat down in the chair he was very familiar with. The seriousness on Dumbledore's face was troubling.

Dumbledore searched Harry's expression. "There's no way to lighten this, Harry. I'm sorry," said Dumbledore.

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Sirius has been arrested," said Dumbledore.

That was so far out of the blue, Harry stood up. "Arrested?" said Harry. "For what?"

"For being one of Voldemort's supporters," said Dumbledore.

Harry almost laughed but Dumbledore looked far too serious. "You're kidding?" said Harry. "This is a joke, right?"

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"But it's-"

"It's true," said Dumbledore. "He didn't deny it. He has the Dark Mark."

"I don't believe it," said Harry. "He wouldn't-"

"I saw it myself, Harry."

Harry stared hard at Dumbledore. There was a grave look on his face. It was something Harry feared. That Sirius would do even that for Harry.

"He did it for me, didn't he?" said Harry softly.

Dumbledore nodded. "Love, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Choices, Professor," said Harry. Dumbledore nodded again. "Where is he?"

"Azkaban," said Dumbledore.

"I have to see him."

"I know, Harry," said Dumbledore. "But you must do it quickly."

There was an odd intense expression on his face now.

"Why?" said Harry.

"He's to be executed tomorrow."

"WHAT?" shouted Harry outraged. "They didn't execute Wormtail."

"Sirius is much more powerful than Wormtail," said Dumbledore. "He's a bigger threat."

Harry's heart stopped then started racing. Sirius was going to be executed because of him. Rage towards the world flooded through his veins. He didn't feel like being the one who had to save it.

But he *did* know what he had to do to save Sirius.

Harry looked at Dumbledore.

"I won't let anyone else die for me," said Harry.

"I know, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry nodded and left.

He walked through the barred gates until he reached Sirius' cell.

"Harry," said Sirius, rising from his cot. "You shouldn't be here."

"*You* shouldn't be here," said Harry.

"Harry-"

"Show me," said Harry.

"Harry-"

"Show me," insisted Harry.

Sirius pushed up the sleeve of his robe revealing the Dark Mark that had been burned onto the skin on his arm.

"When?" said Harry.

"After the trial," said Sirius.

That long ago? So Sirius was never in any real danger from the Death Eaters. "Why?" said Harry.

"I had to be able to come and go to the compound, Harry," said Sirius, his voice was deep with emotion. "It was the only way Voldemort would trust me. It was the only way I could stay with you."

But Sirius wasn't with Harry. First the Ministry and now, it seemed, Voldemort was keeping them apart. Harry felt so stupid. Voldemort always knew where Sirius was. And Sirius had even told Harry to go to Voldemort over the Christmas break.

It was only a matter of time before the Ministry found out. But *now* there was a way that he could be with Sirius. And he could protect him.

"I know, Sirius," said Harry. "But I'm not going to let you die for me."

"Harry—"

"NO," shouted Harry. "I won't let anyone else die for me."

Harry strode away from the cell hearing Sirius shouting after him. That last grain of sand had fallen through the hourglass.

It was time.

And Harry was ready — felt it — knew it.

He was seventeen and was tired of everyone making his decisions for him. He wouldn't be manipulated or controlled. He refused to be helpless anymore.

*You have the power to initiate great change.*

Accept your destiny.

And so Harry would. All of it!

*Draco.*

*Not now Harry. I'm in the middle of a test.*

*I'm out of time.*

*What are you talking about?*

*The choice, Draco. Remember. The choice.*

*What's happened?*

*Has Voldemort called you?*

*No. Harry, tell me what's happened.*

*The Ministry arrested Sirius. They're going to execute him.*

*Oh God. Why?*

*Did you know he was a Death Eater?*

*No.*

*If you knew, Draco, so help me-*

*Harry, I swear I didn't know. Don't you think I would have said something.*

*Draco.*

*Come on, Harry. Granger said you couldn't lie telepathically. You know I'm telling the truth.*

*All right, All right. I believe you.*

*So what are you going to do?*

*Harry heard the hesitance in Draco's question.*

*The only think I can do. I will not let anyone else die for me.*

*So, it's time?*

*Yes. Tell Ron and Hermione to be at the execution. Ron's father should be able to arrange it.*

*And me?*

*I'm sure you'll be there.*

*Harry – What are you going to do?*

*I'm going to make history again, Draco. I'm going to change the world and you guys are going to help me.*

*Great.*

Once outside the gates of Azkaban, Harry apparated to the campfire. He stared at it for a moment.

Harry heard Severus' voice in his head. *Well, famous Harry Potter, how brave do you feel?*

He took a deep breath. "This time it's by choice," muttered Harry. Harry glanced around the compound. It was empty but he heard noises from the conference tent as Harry walked towards it. This would be the first time he would be in it. They were in for an interruption they'd never forget.

He stopped at the entrance when he heard Sirius' name.

"Can't be good."

"Master, what should we do?"

Harry took a step into the tent and was hit with such a head-rush it almost knocked him over.

Harry got a grip on it and looked around. The Death Eaters looked surprised as he stepped further into the large room. Harry located Voldemort sitting behind a large desk.

Voldemort slowly stood up. His expression was inscrutable.

"You felt that, didn't you, Harry," said Voldemort.

"What?" said Harry.

"That rush of power," said Voldemort.

"Is that what it was?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. He turned to his Death Eaters, "Who else felt our power?"

Several Death Eaters voiced that they had felt the surge when Harry had entered. A couple of them dropped to their knees.

Voldemort looked at Harry. "I told you, Harry," said Voldemort. "I told you when you made your choice, the connection would be complete and we would both know it."

So that was it. Harry understood. He could still feel the tingling at the back of his neck. He walked to the front of Voldemort's desk. "I understand," said Harry.

"Do you?" said Voldemort as he settled back into his chair.

Harry leaned on the surface of the desk, staring down into Voldemort's eyes. "You know I do," said Harry.

"Say it, Harry," said Voldemort, the red eyes starting to glow again.

"I accept you," said Harry. "I choose to be with you. I am Lord Voldemort's son."

Voldemort reached out his hand toward Harry's face. Harry flinched.

"I had hoped when you accepted me, the pain would stop," said Voldemort.

"It's our connection," said Harry. "It won't just go away."

Voldemort nodded but he didn't appear as pleased as Harry would have thought.

Harry glanced around at the Death Eaters. "Leave us," said Harry. "I wish to confer with my father."

They left and Harry looked back at Voldemort who now was smiling with the satisfaction Harry had expected.

"Will you help me?" said Harry.

"Of course, Harry," said Voldemort. "Sirius needs to be with us."

Harry nodded and magically pulled a chair closer to Voldemort's desk.

“You already have a plan,” said Harry. “Tell me.”

Voldemort laughed as if all his dreams had just come true.

“Ah, Harry, how well you know me.”

Harry apparated in front of Sirius who was tied to a stake and looked around. When his gaze found the Minister of Magic nearby, he hailed him.

“I contest this execution,” said Harry loudly.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Goodhue. “You can’t.”

Harry stepped toward him.

“Oh, but he can,” said Voldemort who had apparated beside Sirius.

The crowd gasped.

“You know how fiercely Harry defends his family and friends,” said Voldemort.

“Did you feel the power, Sirius?” Harry heard Voldemort say softly to Sirius.

“Yes,” said Sirius. “What’s going on?”

“This is Harry’s show, Sirius,” said Voldemort. “Just watch him.”

Harry addressed the Minister. “Sirius’ only crime is trying to protect me as I tried to protect him,” said Harry. “I won’t let you execute him.”

“He has joined Lord Voldemort,” said Goodhue. “You can’t stop us.”

“Can’t I,” said Harry. He raised a hand and Sirius was freed from the stake. Voldemort pulled him away from it.

Masked Death Eaters started apparating around the field. The crowd backed away in fear.

“You’ve joined him, then?” said Goodhue with surprise.



“No, Minister,” said Harry. “He has joined me.”

Voldemort chuckled. “Semantics, Harry?”

Harry ignored him. “You see, I will not be manipulated anymore. I won’t be controlled. And I won’t accept what the world throws at me. I am not be helpless anymore. You will not kill my godfather, who I love and who has done nothing but try to protect me.”

Magical ropes encircled Harry controlled by at least four aurors.

Harry felt Voldemort’s power and with a shrug broke out of them as if they were made of thread.

“I’m not the boy who lived anymore,” said Harry.

“Does that mean we’re going to Bulgaria now?”

Harry almost choked on a laugh and glanced around until he saw Ron and Hermione standing in the front of the crowd, close enough to hear.

“I have a couple of things to do first, Ron,” said Harry.

“Let me know,” said Ron. “We’re ready.”

They were with him. Harry was filled with a rush of gratitude and nodded to them.

“So you’ve chosen the Dark side,” said Goodhue.

“No, Mr. Goodhue,” said Harry. “I’ve chosen to be the balance of power.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know, Minister,” said Harry. “But you will.”

“Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Yes, father?”

“Show them your conviction.”

“What do you mean?” said Harry.

“Wormtail,” said Voldemort.

Harry glanced around and found Peter Pettigrew in an enclosure nearby set up so that the convicted could see Sirius being made an example of.

“I won’t kill for you,” said Harry.

“I’m not asking you to kill for me, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I’m telling you to kill for you.”

“Explain,” said Harry.

“He betrayed your parents and you saved his life,” said Voldemort. “He betrayed you and you almost went to prison. His betrayal has now included Sirius. Wizarding honor is very specific, Harry.”

*Betrayal.* Yes. Harry understood. The world needed to feel Harry betrayed them. Harry nodded.

“I understand, father,” said Harry.

He raised his hand and Wormtail fell to his knees.

“No, Harry,” cried Wormtail. “I beg you.”

“*Avada Kedavra!*” said Harry.

Peter Pettigrew, who betrayed Harry’s parents, stole Harry’s blood, kidnapped Ron, turned on Harry and who was really responsible for Harry’s entire nightmarish life, hit the ground dead.

“Very good, my son,” said Voldemort with satisfaction.

“Take Sirius, Father, please,” said Harry.

*Draco, are you here?*

Yes.

*Go get Ron and Hermione.*

*I can't apparate with both of them.*

*Just tell them I need them and hold onto them. I will do the rest.*

*All right, Harry. What-*

*I have to talk to Ginger.*

The rest of the Weasley family was across the clearing and Harry approached them. Mr. Weasley had a tight grip on his only daughter who looked like she wanted to run to him.

"I'm sorry, Ginger," said Harry.

"No, Harry," cried Ginger. "Take me with you."

"I can't."

"Please, Harry. I love you." Ginger was crying.

"You won't understand what I have to do," said Harry. He looked at Mrs. Weasley. "Take care of her."

"What have you done, Harry?" said Arthur Weasley.

"You'll see, Mr. Weasley," said Harry.

Looking back at Ginger, Harry reached out and gently touched her face.

"Harry." Her lips quivered.

"I'll do what I have to do, Ging," said Harry. "Depend on it."

"Are you ready, Harry?"

Harry turned, hearing Ginger's sobs behind him but he steeled his resolve.

"Yes, Father," said Harry.

Harry waved his arm over his head and all the Death Eaters there as well as anyone they had a grip on disappeared at once.

Within moments they were all beside the fire at the compound. Harry fell into his chair.

"Well that was weird," said Ron.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and looked up at Sirius.

"Nice rescue, Harry," said Sirius. "Thanks."

"I told you I wouldn't let them kill you," said Harry. He looked at Voldemort. He had never seen him looking so pleased. "So now what?"

Voldemort chuckled as he settled into his own chair. "You make your demands, Harry," said Voldemort. "At this very moment, you control the entire wizarding world."

"Me?" said Harry incredulously.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Didn't you see their fear, their awe of the power they felt when we were together." He looked at Ron and Hermione. "Can you feel it?" he asked them.

"What that tingling?" said Ron.

"It feels like there's a loose electrical wire nearby," said Hermione.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "That is magical residue from the power Harry and I now share when we are together. Individually, we are both stronger than any other wizard alive but together our power is immeasurable."

"So what do we do with it?" said Harry, trying to fight that feeling of helplessness that was trying to sneak back.

"I told you, Harry," said Voldemort. "Tell them your demands."

“What are my demands?”

Voldemort chuckled. “Look to you council,” said Voldemort.

Harry looked at Sirius, Draco, Ron and Hermione.

Sirius nodded. Ron shrugged. Draco fell into a chair looking concerned. Hermione was the only one who looked confident.

Harry looked back at Voldemort. “And you?”

“I will insure that your demands are carried out. The balance of power, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry looked at Hermione. Everything was obvious to her. “So what are we doing?”

Hermione glanced at Voldemort. “If I read the prophecy correctly, you are restoring order.”

“Meaning?” said Ron.

“Meaning,” said Hermione. “Forcing the world to restructure the Ministry – reorganize it.”

“Very good, Hermione,” said Voldemort.

“How?” said Harry.

“Just tell them what to do, Harry,” said Hermione. “Everyone fears you and Lord Voldemort now. Tell them what to do and they will do it. If they believe in the prophecy then they know *you* will do the right thing.”

Harry’s head was starting to hurt again. He closed his eyes.

“Can’t I just go to Bulgaria now,” said Harry.

Draco and Ron laughed.

Harry felt the pain and opened his eyes as Voldemort took hold of his chin, leaning over him.

“We have work to do, Harry,” said Voldemort. “There is no escaping it now. You aren’t helpless anymore.”

Harry nodded staring back at Voldemort. “I know,” said Harry as Voldemort moved away. He returned to his chair and Harry looked at Hermione. “So how should we reconstruct the Ministry?”

Hermione magicked herself a table and chair then some parchment and ink. She picked up a quill.

“Well I think we should start with eliminating some of the more stupid departments,” said Hermione. “We can start with that Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures Department. What kind of farce was that? We can create some sort of observation and control department and put Hagrid in charge of it.”

Ron snorted. Harry had to smile.

Voldemort actually laughed. “Very good, Hermione,” said Voldemort. “You are indeed a natural at this sort of thing.” He turned to Harry. “I have said it many times Harry, you have chosen your friends wisely. They do you credit.”

And so with the help of everyone in the compound, they restructured the departments of the Ministry and called for formal elections, elections that included *everyone*. Everyone, over the age of 15, could vote and anyone could be elected, but it was their choice if they wanted to accept the position they were offered.

Once Harry delivered his requests (Harry preferred that terminology over demands – Harry guessed he was getting good at semantics too) to the Minister, Voldemort sent his Death Eaters out to observe the wizarding world.

Harry left his tent and saw several Death Eaters dump someone at the foot of Voldemort’s chair. Voldemort stood up which Harry took alarm at. The person must be important.

Harry approached the fire cautiously. He soon saw the wooden leg of the man on the ground. Moody?

“Pure evil,” said Mad-Eye Moody. “You can rot if you think ole’ Moody will conform to your stinking demands.”

Voldemort chuckled looking down at him. Moody was magically bound and Harry doubted he could find leverage enough to pull himself to a standing position.

“Come now, Alastor,” said Voldemort. “Harry’s demands are quite reasonable.”

“Harry?” said Moody. “Don’t try to con me, Voldemort. I don’t know what you did to the boy but there is no way that boy would turn. I know it. I felt it. Harry’s as inherently good as you are evil.”

“Precisely, Alastor,” said Voldemort. “Don’t you agree, Harry.”

Voldemort had noticed Harry approaching.

Moody looked up at him and he felt that magic eye of his scour over him. “What’s he done to you, boy?” said Moody. “I still sense nothing Dark from you.”

Harry walked around his chair and raised his hand. All of Moody’s restraints fell off him and Harry helped him up.

“There is nothing Dark in me, Mr. Moody,” said Harry. “Well aside for some of the stuff I got from him,” Harry said with a nod at Voldemort. Voldemort chuckled. “It’s the balance of power,” said Harry. “Can *you* understand it?”

Moody stared at him. “He’s not forcing you, is he?” said Moody.

“No, sir,” said Harry. “I am here by choice. The world needs to heal.”

“See here-“

“Mr. Moody,” Harry interrupted. “Go back to them. Tell them to do as I tell them or Lord Voldemort will make them. I don’t want it to come to that.”

Moody stammered a minute.

“Please,” said Harry. “There need not be any death.” Harry raised his hand to Moody’s face. Like pulling a tissue out of a box, Harry drew Voldemort’s strength. Moody hit the ground. “Our power is that strong, Mr. Moody,” said Harry seriously. “You don’t want to make my father angry. He is very possessive over me and what displeases me, displeases him. Tell them to do as I say,” said Harry.

Moody looked up at Harry with astonishment. Harry wasn’t sure if it was because of the power he’d just demonstrated or that Harry was being so forceful. It didn’t matter to Harry. Harry just didn’t want any killing.

“Avery,” said Harry to the Death Eater who had dragged Moody in. “Take Mr. Moody back to the Ministry.”

The Death Eaters didn’t question Harry anymore, nor did they look to Voldemort for permission.

“Yes, Master Harry,” said Avery as he pulled Moody away.

“Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry turned to him. He had settled back into his chair. Harry fell into his own. “Yes?”

“You never cease to amaze me,” said Voldemort.

“What have I done now?” said Harry.

“You’ve shown compassion and conviction at the same time,” said Voldemort. “You can inspire fear and assurance at the same time.”

“So,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “There’s that modesty,” said Voldemort. “It is a rare gift, Harry. You are a born leader.”

Harry sighed. “I am what the world – what *you* have made me,” said Harry. “Feel free to gloat.”



Voldemort laughed. "Always the cynic, my Harry," said Voldemort. "But you are wrong. You are what the world *needs*."

"No, Voldemort," said Harry. "*WE* are what the world needs."

"Ah, Harry, I have taught you well."

## Chapter 19

### Out of Time

Harry was restless. Everything had been going so smoothly, so perfectly. It was frightening. The Death Eaters had reported that everyone was complying with Harry's requests to the letter. Very little resistance therefore no need for punishment.

Harry didn't quite believe them. Not that he thought they were out and out lying. He could just sense that there was something deceitful in their report.

Voldemort was little help.

As the reporting Death Eaters left the conference tent, Harry moved around Voldemort's desk to stand before it. Apparently, Voldemort could tell something was wrong.

"What's troubling you, my son?"

"No offense," said Harry. "I just think your Death Eater's are being less than honest."

"Less than honest?" said Voldemort with a smirk. "Harry, don't you trust them?"

Harry peered at Voldemort over the desk. "Is that a trick question?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Never mind. Why do you think they would deceive you?"

Harry sighed. "I'm not saying they're lying. I just sense"

"Sense what?"

Somewhat frustrated that he couldn't explain, Harry dropped into his chair. "Forget it," muttered Harry.

"Tell me, Harry," said Voldemort. "Your instincts are very good. Tell me what you sense."

Leaning on his knees, Harry clutched at his hair. "Just that they're leaving something out. That I'm missing something." Harry looked up. "Don't you feel it?"

Voldemort considered it, staring intently at Harry. "I sense their eagerness. Their anticipation."

Harry stood up. "Yes. That's it," said Harry. "But of what?"

"Harry-"

Harry turned back to the desk and leaned on it. "You know. I know you do," said Harry. "I'm asking. Tell me, father."

Voldemort sighed. "The end, Harry."

Harry blinked.

"They're waiting for the end of anarchy and chaos. When the balance of power will reign supreme."

"I thought that's what we were doing."

"Yes, Harry. But the time will come when we will walk into the Ministry of Magic and take our rightful place."

"But what-"

"Harry, the wizarding world is uniting as we speak. No ministry, no matter how organized will be able to hold it together."

"Then who-"

"I will, of course," said Voldemort.

"Explain," said Harry.

Voldemort stood up and came around his desk to stand before Harry, his eyes studying Harry's expression.

"You have done very well," said Voldemort. "The reconstruction of the Ministry went exactly as it should."

"I did the right thing."

"Of course you did, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry was starting to doubt it. He paced his office, distractedly running the phoenix medallion along the chain around his neck.

"I'm missing something here," muttered Harry. "I know it."

Ron sat in a chair in front of his desk. Hermione sat at his desk with a quill and parchment. Draco was leaning against the wall, arms and ankles crossed, staring at Harry (his typical Slytherin observation mode).

"Well, I think he's trying to set up the Ministry of Magic as a figurehead," said Hermione. "Like the queen. And you and him will become established as like Prime Ministers."

Harry didn't think that was quite it.

"And what about the Death Eaters?" Ron wanted to know. "Will they be the parliament. I don't know about you but--"

"Ron," Hermione cut him off. "I think it will work more like the Ministry will still govern the wizarding world. Just that Harry and Lord Voldemort will have finally say."

In essence, that was what Voldemort was trying to convey. But

Harry turned toward Draco. "What do you think?" said Harry

Draco stepped away from the wall. "Well in the ideal situation, I think Granger is right. But we're forgetting that Voldemort is still an Evil Dark Lord."

"But Harry is--"

"Exactly," Draco cut Hermione off. "How long do you think the two can coexist in absolute harmony?"

“Voldemort is indulging Harry right now. He’s given him everything, total control because he wants, needs Harry to be with him in the end. But don’t kid yourself, in the end Voldemort *will* take over.”

“And how will he do that?” said Ron. “Harry is just as powerful as he is now. What about the prophecy?”

Harry listened intently as he watched Draco pace.

“At this point in time, I don’t think either one of them could kill the other.”

“They’d both have to die,” said Hermione.

“Apart from that,” said Draco. “They’re bonded by more than magic now.”

*Don’t go there, Draco.*

*You know I’m right Harry.*

“But how can he take over without Harry trying to stop him?” said Ron.

Draco looked at Harry. Harry lifted his brows curiously.

“It still hurts when he touches you, doesn’t it?” said Draco.

Harry nodded.

“But it shouldn’t drain him anymore,” said Hermione. “They already share all their power.”

Harry paced away from them, running a hand through his hair.

“Torture is still torture, Granger,” said Draco grimly. “You’ve seen it.”

Hermione gasped. “You don’t think he would resort to that *now* do you?”

“I don’t know what he’d resort to at this point,” said Draco. “But the point is this nice amiable little reconstruction is *not* going to satisfy the Dark Lord.”

Harry turned back to face them. "He can't *make* me do anything, Draco," said Harry.

"He doesn't have to," said Draco. "You are here by choice, Harry. He can use your power the same as you can use his."

"But—"

Hermione cut Ron off. "Ok. Regardless of the power, just what does he want to do with it?"

Draco sighed. "That I don't know."

"Why not?" Ron demanded. "You're a Death Eater aren't you?"

"Ron—"

"No, I want to know."

"I bear the mark, Weasley," said Draco with irritation. "But you all know where my loyalties are. You think they are going to tell *me*."

Harry sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. "I need some air. I need to clear my head."

"Go for a walk," said Hermione. "You'll feel better."

"No," said Harry. "I think I'll fly for a while."

"Fly," said Ron eagerly. "You want company?" Then he looked around. "I don't have a broom. Come to think of it, you don't either. Too bad."

Harry was blinking at him until he remembered that Ron and Hermione didn't know.

D started laughing.

*They don't know, do they?*

H sent him a glance.

*Be quiet, Draco.*

“Er-“ said H

“Harry doesn’t need a broom, Weasley,” said Draco with a highly smug grin

“What-“

Harry sat on his desk and transformed into his hawk form.

Ron leapt to his feet. “*That’s* your animagus form?” said Ron. Then he glanced at Draco. “*He* knew before us.”

Harry transformed again with a sigh. “Ron-“

“I thought the whole point of keeping it a secret was so that Voldemort and the Death Eaters wouldn’t know,” said Ron.

“Ron, Voldemort knew practically before I started learning,” said Harry.

“And it hardly matters *now*,” Hermione added.

“But why does *he* know?”

*Here we go again.*

“Oh get over it, Weasley,” said Draco.

*Draco.*

“I simply asked him about it,” Draco went on, ignoring Harry’s warning. “Did you ever?”

“I-er,”

Harry strode out of his tent. He didn’t want to deal with that right now. Hermione could handle it, or at the very least, she would hex them both into silence.

Transforming, he spread his wings and soared up and through the trees. He couldn't keep Voldemort's words from echoing in his mind.

*No ministry, no matter how organized will be able to hold it together.*

Draco's words were as haunting.

*How long do you think the two can coexist?*

And Harry still couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something.

Harry spotted a dim glow from the woods below him and circled closer. The crackle of a campfire could be heard among the rustling of leaves and twigs being broken.

Cautiously approaching the fire, Harry finally perched on a branch. People were approaching the fire from all directions.

Death Eaters?

Harry watched the scene curiously. About ten robed figures were gathered around the fire, whispering among themselves.

Another figure stepped into the glow.

"Lucius, is that you?"

"Of course, it's me you idiot. Who else were you expecting?" Lucius Malfoy's tone was sharp and harsh. He was clearly not happy. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes," said another Death Eater. "We *are* the elite. Do you think we would miss this."

"Keep your voice down," another hissed at him.

"What are you worried about," the first shot back. "The boy went back to his tent."

"His friends are still with him."



"It doesn't matter," snorted the other. "After tomorrow"

"Be that as it may," came another voice, "he's going to find out."

"The master will deal with it," said Lucius quietly.

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Who'd have thought that the master's plan could possibly work so well."

More murmurs and Harry caught snatches of "Brilliant" "Such patience" "Total dependence."

"The boy is-

"You imbeciles," Lucius cut him off viciously. "That boy could level the entire compound with a wave of his hand. He's come into his majority and he's not stupid."

"Don't over-react, Lucius, the master can control him."

"The master can subdue him," Lucius corrected. "But he doesn't want it to come to that." Lucius sighed. "Look, the point is that the master wants it done as quickly and as quietly as possible."

One of the Death Eaters chuckled. "What he doesn't know won't hurt us."

"In a manner of speaking," said Lucius.

"So tell us."

Harry recognized that voice as Avery.

"Harry will address the Ministry tomorrow," said Lucius. "Then he will step down. As soon as he returns to the compound, the master will subdue him and we will begin the cleansing process."

The laughter around the campfire sent a chill over Harry.

“I repeat,” said Lucius, “These are powerful witches and wizards. Don’t forget that fact. The Master wants them to have the opportunity to yield.”

There was more laughter.

“Join us or die,” someone sniggered.

“So we’re back,” said Avery.

Lucius looked up. The fire cast an eerie glow over his pale features. “Yes. You all know what to do.”

Lucius stared back down at the fire as the other Death Eaters dispersed. His expression was odd considering what Harry had just heard. Remarkably, he looked almost like Harry was feeling. Betrayed, disappointed, apprehensive – frightened.

“This is becoming a nightmare,” Lucius muttered.

Harry blinked as Lucius waved his wand, extinguishing the fire.

Lucius walked back toward the compound but Harry sat on his branch staring at the spot where the fire had burned so vividly.

So that’s it? Voldemort wins?

Harry transformed on the way to the ground, still staring into the ashes of the fire.

All his manipulations, his gifts – was any of it even necessary since Voldemort planned to resort to murder and mayhem anyway? True the power was awesome, but was it worth all of Voldemort’s time and effort just to fulfill that part of the prophecy?

The prophesy

Harry’s hands clenched at his sides.

There was only one way to end it. Only one way to prevent the killing.

## Chapter 20

### The Treasure

Harry stood solemnly before the table of all the newly elected Ministry Department heads. The prophecy – Voldemort – had been right. The wizarding world had united and had reconstructed just as Harry told them.

Sitting before Harry were the best witches and wizards with the best credentials and the best experience. Before Harry were the best the wizarding world had to offer. All elected – all accepting – and they'd all be dead tomorrow if

One wizard stood up and addressed Harry.

"Is Lord Voldemort and his son pleased?"

Harry frowned at the man.

"Minister," said Harry. "Are *you* pleased? The wizarding world elected *you*." Harry glanced around. "All of you. They chose you to lead them. Doesn't that say something?"

"I see before me the best witches and wizards there are. All with the power and the determination to correct the chaos which started in the world and in the Ministry when Voldemort first rose to power.

"He didn't know then that he needed the balance of power. All he could do was kill and cause terror and mayhem and fear and death.

"Then he came across me," said Harry. "You all know what happened after that. But Voldemort figured out what he needed after that. He knew what he did wrong, what he had to do.

"He's been manipulating me for three years now and, as I have said, I won't be manipulated any longer, nor will I be controlled. I gave him the balance of power of my own free will. Order is restored.

"Voldemort thinks he can take over now through me," Harry went on. "But I won't be used either. Our society can heal itself now." Harry

looked at the new Minister of Magic. "Mr. Weasley, my destiny is fulfilled. It's time for me – and him – to go."

A look of dawning then of horror came across the Minister's face.

"Harry," said Arthur Weasley, "You didn't turn."

"I did what I had to do, sir," said Harry.

Harry heard the others start to mutter. *The balance of power. The heirs unite. Sacrifice the treasure.*

"He did it for us," said Steve Goodhue.

Mr. Weasley didn't turn from facing Harry. "Yes, Steve," said Mr. Weasley. "Harry-"

"Mr. Weasley, my time is up. It has to end before the terror returns. Tell-“ Harry cut himself off and looked away not sure what he wanted to say to anyone. "Goodbye," said Harry. "And good luck."

"No," shouted Mr. Weasley. "Harry-"

"My time is over," said Harry. "I'm not needed anymore."

"But you are, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "We still need you."

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I'd like to be just Harry again."

Harry apparated to his room at La Casa Black trying not to remember Mr. Weasley's stricken face. The Ministry had figured it out, but it didn't make Harry feel any better. He still had to die.

Well, he guessed his mother had bought him 16 years. But now he had friends and people he loved. At the age of one, what did he have?

Harry shook off the thoughts and looked in his mirror. "You said you were ready, Harry," he told his reflection. "Accept your destiny. ALL of it."

Harry stared at himself.

*Are you ready to die, Harry?*

Harry's life was a nightmare but at least Harry had his friends.

With a heavy heart, Harry sat down at his desk to say goodbye to them. Picking up his quill, he began,

*Dear Ron,*

*I know you will hate me for not taking you with me on this last adventure but I need you to take care of Hermione. I surmise she will be a wreck. I need to know that you two will be happy together. Remember the fun we had getting into trouble.*

*I want you to have my Firebolt. Remember me whenever you fly it.*

*Always remember that I know I had the best friend anyone could ask for. You and your family has done more for me than anything in this world.*

*Thanks for being my best friend. I know it wasn't easy but you did a hell of a job doing it.*

*Harry*

*Dear Hermione,*

*Please take care of Ron. He needs you more than I think he knows.*

*You have helped me so much, I don't know how to thank you.*

*I entrust Hedwig to your care. She has always trusted you and you never got an owl as you so wanted.*

*I will be sending Rowan to Ginger. I can not say everything I want to say to her, so please reassure her and support her.*

*I'm counting on you – as I know I can.*

*Much love,*

*Harry*

*Dear Sirius,*

*You know as well as I that this was coming. I can't do what I'm told on this one but I do wish we had moved to Bulgaria.*

*Sirius, I love you and I trust you with the most important things in my life – my friends. Please take care of them. You have broken all boundaries for me. Please do the same for them.*

*Please don't hate me.*

*Harry*

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,*

*Thank you for allowing me into your family. My life was its fullest whenever I was sitting at your table at the Burrow, listening to the loving bickering and complaining. Everyone in your family is a special individual and I'm honored to have known every one of them.*

*Please don't be upset with all the trouble I've gotten Ron into. As the best friend anyone could ask for, I have relied on him the most and he's never let me down. Be proud of him. I am. I wish he could help me now, but I know he can't. No one can.*

*I am alone again but it doesn't bother me because your family has shown me what it's like to be loved. Thank you.*

*Harry*

*Dear Mrs. Weasley,*

*You have been the closest thing to a mother that I have ever had. As large as your family is and with all the people you care about, that you had room enough in your heart for me still astounds me.*

*Thank you.*

*I have a vast closeness with your family but my dreams are pretty accurate. I had one of me sitting at the table at the Burrow and you*

*complaining about my hair being untidy as it always is. I called you mum.*

*I think of that dream often. Please remember that when you think of me and know that is how I saw you.*

*I wish I knew – could find the words to express my thanks.*

*Harry*

*Draco,*

*It seems that we've come along way since the train our first year. From enmity to telepathy. If I've never thanked you for being there at there at the end then let me do it now. You understood and it was what I needed. Thank you.*

*I hope you consider me your friend now because I consider you mine. To prove this, I am sending testimony to Dumbledore to help clear you of charges that may incriminate you.*

*I have made my choice and now I must deal with it. I'll try not to be too tragic about it but with my Gryffindor moronity, you never know.*

*Please take care of Sennie. The sword bestowed to me from your father has become one of my dearest possessions. As it comes from your father's collection, I know you will care for it and I know Sennie will accept you when I am gone. Fencing and flying, Draco. Our rivalry always attracted attention.*

*Harry*

*PS: What does one wear to a prophetic suicide?*

*Dear Remus,*

*This is perhaps the hardest letter I've had to write. I'm out of time, I'm out of excuses. I hope I'm not out of courage. But I know I have you.*

*When you get this, I will be gone. You will be the only one Sirius has left. Please don't let him hate me. I know he will be disappointed in me but he knows (and so do you) that I did what I had to do.*

*Please take care of Sirius. I trust you to do it just as I know my father would have.*

*Harry*

The last couple of letters required a lot of thought but once done, Harry tied them all to Hedwig's leg and sent her Dumbledore.

"He'll know what to do, girl," Harry told Hedwig. "Then go to Hermione. I'm counting on you."

Hedwig hooted and nipped Harry's hand then she rubbed her head into his neck. With another hoot, she flew out the window.

Harry turned to Rowan. She was nearing the end of her cycle. Harry had read a phoenix' cycle could be a very long time or even very short depending on the powers it had performed, how much healing it had done and how many lives it had saved. In Rowan's case, Harry guessed she hadn't had an easy time being his phoenix.

She was looking at him now as if she were about to berate him again in song. She jumped onto his arm, staring into his eyes.

"I'm sorry, girl, there isn't anything you can do," said Harry. "My mind is made up and you know how stubborn I am."

Rowan sang softly. Her song told Harry she would wait for him. Confused, Harry simply stroked her then let her hop back onto her perch.

"Go to Ginger when I'm gone," Harry told her. She mere stared at him.

Harry sighed and took a last look around at his room. As a last gesture, he raised his hand and rearranged the furniture.

"I always wanted a bed near a window," said Harry.



He glanced at his watch. Dinner time. He tapped it, saying, "What should I be doing?"

*You should be having dinner not contemplating suicide.* Flashed the watch.

Harry raised his hand then decided he didn't want a commentary.

*No excuses, Harry.*

He apparated to Dumbledore's office, knowing the Headmaster would be down at dinner and looked around. Fawkes squawked at him and Harry glanced at him. He looked as ugly as any newborn Phoenix.

"Cycled again, have we?" said Harry. "I guess you've been busy the past few years too."

Harry moved to the shelf and picked up the sorting hat. He put it on his head.

"Ah, back again," said the hat.

"You know what I need," said Harry.

"Um, yes. Courage. Plenty of courage," said the hat. "And the need to prove yourself, your loyalty."

"Yes," said Harry impatient now. "Now give me what I need. Please."

Harry felt the thud on his head and took off the hat. He reached in and pulled out Godric Gryffindor's sword, gripping it tightly by the hilt.

"Thanks," said Harry as he put the hat back.

Harry took a couple of deep breaths.

*The end of my nightmare.*

## Chapter 21

### The Sacrifice

Harry looked around. The ruins of the Chamber of Secrets hadn't changed since the last time he had almost died in it. He tucked the sword under his belt concealed within the folds of his robes. This was it. The end.

Harry touched his scar. *Voldemort*.

He waited. Surely it wouldn't take Voldemort that long to come, especially since he had not gone back to the compound as he was expected to. His breathing echoed throughout the chamber. With a sweep of his hand, he lit the torches around the cavern. Harry was nervous now.

*Are you ready to die, Harry?*

"Harry, what are you doing here?" said Voldemort.

Harry sighed with relief. Voldemort had come and he had also apparated *behind* Harry.

"Why did you lie to me?" said Harry, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"I never lied to you, Harry," said Voldemort sounding surprised.

"You said we were fixing the Ministry."

"Which you did, Harry," said Voldemort. "Very well."

"But—"

"Harry, do you really think those fools could maintain the level of equality, the chain of command that you have established?" said Voldemort.

"Yes," said Harry trying to sound convincing.

"Harry," said Voldemort patiently. "The wizards usurped of their power will not stand idly by while they are replaced. And the new

administration is not going to simply return said jurisdiction to them. Someone must retain order.”

“Which is where you come in,” said Harry, still not looking at Voldemort. He had hoped in some bizarre way that Voldemort *had* changed. That he did have another way.

“Precisely,” said Voldemort. Harry could hear the smirk in his tone. “I told you that. It is what I do.”

“And I have to do what I have to do,” said Harry breathlessly.

“You don’t, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You know I will always protect you and those you care about, regardless of what happens now. You need not worry about anything anymore. I will insure you are always happy.”

God those words hurt.

“It’s wrong,” said Harry softly.

“Why?” snapped Voldemort. “Why is it wrong to be happy?”

“I can’t be happy at the expense of others.”

“Why not?” Voldemort demanded. It was clear he was displeased with Harry’s attitude. “It didn’t bother anyone else to plan your life for you with little regard for your happiness.”

*That* statement hit Harry in the chest.

“Haven’t I done everything in my power to please you – make you happy?” said Voldemort.

Harry was still staring at the ground, his heart thundering in his chest. “Yes,” he said hollowly.

“And you have pleased me – made me very proud,” said Voldemort, his tone triumphant. “So enough. Stop your worrying and come home with me. I have work to do.”

Harry mentally shook himself. *Why* did he talk to him? Voldemort always messed up his mind – always had Harry's emotions in turmoil. He had a headache now too.

"It has to end, Voldemort," said Harry, getting a grip on the hilt of the sword.

Voldemort sighed. "I see," said Voldemort. "The prophesy. The noble sacrifice. Can you kill me, Harry? Are you ready to die?"

"You know I must," said Harry.

Voldemort floored Harry by laughing. "And you chose the Chamber of Secrets to kill me in?" said Voldemort. "How very," Harry heard that chuckle, "Prophetic."

"Yes," said Harry, wondering why Voldemort sounded so nonplussed.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "Did you know that the power it would take right now to destroy me – and you - would likely destroy the school?"

Harry hadn't thought of that. But then he hadn't planned on using magic anyway. "Would it?" said Harry.

"Oh, yes," said Voldemort. "Would you do that, my son? Destroy the only place both of us found refuge as children?"

Harry took a deep breath, maneuvering the sword before him.

"No, father. I wouldn't," said Harry.

"Then what's your point, my boy?"

"That I have to do it the old fashion way."

Harry turned, lifted the sword and plunged the blade into Voldemort's chest. "I won't let anyone else die for me," said Harry. Harry's eyes met that red gaze. "I'm sorry, father."

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "You figured it out."

Voldemort fell to his knees before Harry. Harry still had a grip on the sword. He lowered to his knees too.

“Do it, Voldemort,” said Harry.

“I am unarmed, Harry.”

“You don’t need a weapon,” said Harry. “You have your touch.”

“No, Harry, I won’t.”

Harry pulled the sword out of Voldemort’s chest. Voldemort hit the marble floor, his blood spilling over the floor. Harry leaned over him. “You have to,” said Harry.

“No, Harry, I don’t,” said Voldemort. “I want you to live. I told you how much you have pleased me. I don’t want you to die. With you lives my teachings, my memory, my power. No, Harry, I concede my life so you may live.”

“NO!” shouted Harry. “I have to die.”

“No, Harry.” Voldemort’s voice was weak now. “I have conceded. You will live. I want my son to live.”

“NO!” shouted Harry again, panicking now. He had to die or Voldemort would rise again to terrorize the wizarding world. “Voldemort! Voldemort!” said Harry, staring at the bleeding form of his nemesis.

Harry was shaking. He couldn’t fail now.

“You were wrong, Harry,” said Voldemort. Harry leaned closer to hear. “I will die for you.”

*This isn’t happening.* Harry’s brain went into overload. “I have to die too.”

“Why do you argue with me?”

Harry looked at Voldemort’s hand and picked it up.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort very weakly.

Harry stared at him. With a deep breath, Harry pressed the hand onto his scar. Screaming, Harry fell to the floor, but he held on to the hand.

Together, their power was immeasurable – so was the pain. The last thing Harry heard was, "Stubborn."

"My God, there's so much blood."

Remus' voice.

"Hermione, don't come in here," Sirius shouted.

"Well Voldemort's dead," said Remus. "How's Harry?"

"I can't tell," said Sirius, sounding hoarse. "He's warm to the touch but I can't find a pulse."

"Ron," called Remus.

Harry heard Rowan's fluttering wings as if she had settled on his chest and heard her song. Harry felt numb though. He hadn't felt Sirius touching him and he didn't feel Rowan's tears falling on him.

Was he dead? He should be. Then why could he hear them?

"Harry, you idiot," said Ron. "Why didn't you take me?"

*Sorry, Ron.* Thought Harry.

"NOOOO," definitely Hermione.

"I told you not to come in here!" said Sirius.

But it was too late. Hermione was sobbing.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione.

"We don't know that he's dead yet, Hermione," said Ron. "Will you have some hope, damn it. We still have to face my sister."

*Ginger.*

Remorse settled over Harry. More than remorse – regret, sorrow, bitterness.

Harry's note to Ginger had been brief. He just simply didn't know what to tell her so he had simply wrote: *Harry loves Ginger.*

He could still hear everything as they moved him to the hospital wing but he couldn't see or speak. Harry didn't even know if his eyes were open.

A flurry of voices floated around him. Some he recognized, some he didn't.

*Harry?*

Harry's heart lightened. Draco.

*Harry, can you hear me?*

Yes! Yes, I can hear you.

"Nothing," said Draco.

*Harry? Where are you, you moron?*

DRACO, I CAN HEAR YOU!

"I'm sorry," said Draco sadly. "I don't hear anything."

But I can hear you. Harry tried to scream it. Draco didn't reply.

"It was his choice to make, Draco," said Dumbledore. "All of you. Harry did what he had to do."

A hand was placed to his chest.

"The heir will live."  
Trelawney. Harry lost all hope. He was a goner.

Harry woke up and found he couldn't move. He opened his eyes. At least he could see. He looked down at his hands. He was tied to the bed. Why? He glanced around. It wasn't the hospital wing of Hogwarts. He was in a private room, pure white – stark, sanitary – with very little furnishings.

Turning his hands, he unbound his hands and feet from the bed with the command. He shifted to test his body for pain. It was minimal, so Harry sat up. The room was dim and empty except for him.

He tested his legs by standing on them. They held him up so he moved to a cabinet where he found his clothes. While he was dressing, he noticed the clipboard on the table by his bed and picked it up.

*Symptoms: Massive Blood loss, Trauma and shock*

Prognosis: Death, brain death, insanity

No wonder he was tied up. They thought he'd be crazy if he ever woke up.

Harry stopped to think. Was he crazy?

He didn't feel crazy. He was a little weak but he didn't feel any worse than all the other times Voldemort had tortured him. Truth be told, Harry figured he'd probably be better off nuts. Harry had to smile.

He had lived. Voldemort was dead and Harry had lived.

Harry frowned. How the hell did *that* happen. Harry should be dead. But Voldemort had wanted Harry to live.

Harry smirked. Even in death, Voldemort got Harry to do what he wanted. Harry could almost hear Voldemort's voice.

*Always the cynic, my Harry.*

Harry pushed it out of his mind. He was free now. He could have a life, a home, a family. It was that last thought that had Harry moving.



He checked the rest of the room to see if anything else was his, then he apparated to La Casa Black.

Harry heard laughing from the dining room. He stood in the hall way, just inside the door. Harry heard Sirius and a couple of the Weasleys. They were talking about Charlie. His dragon training. Harry listened for a few more minutes.

After more teasing and a few more laughs, Harry apparated to his room and laid down. He was tired and a feeling of abandonment hit him. They left him laying in a hospital bed, tied up. Did anyone still care?

Harry felt a bird land on his arm. Rowan started singing. Her song told him *I told you I'd wait*.

"Thanks, girl," said Harry.

Harry heard the pounding of footsteps on the stairs and heard the door crash open.

"HARRY!" shouted Ron and he practically fell on him. "I heard Rowan sing and I thought... well I knew. Well damn it, Harry."

"Hi, Ron," said Harry without looking up. He felt exhausted all of the sudden.

People were crowding into his room.

Sirius sat on his bed beside him and leaned over him.

"This is still my room, isn't it, Sirius?" said Harry weakly. "I can still stay here can't I?"

"Harry," said Sirius and he seemed to be choking on it. "Of course. This is your home."

Harry sighed. "I didn't much like being tied to the hospital bed," said Harry.

"You were unconscious for four months, Harry," he heard someone say. Could have been Remus, but Harry wasn't sure.

"I'm not crazy," said Harry. He sighed. "I wish I was, but I'm not."

Harry still hadn't opened his eyes. He reached out a hand and someone grabbed it.

"You're home now, Harry," said Hermione, squeezing his hand. "You're going to be just fine."

Harry let himself smile. "You wouldn't let it be any other way, Hermione."

A few weeks later, once Harry had his strength back, he was dragged to a press conference.

"I can't do it," said Harry.

"Harry, you have to address the public," said Sirius.

"Why?"

"Why?" said Sirius incredulously. "You restored order to the wizarding world and defeated the most powerful dark lord of the century. You have to make a statement."

"Sirius," said Harry. "I'm going to be sick."

"Oh stop it, Harry," said Sirius. He pulled a piece of parchment out his robes.

"I'm serious," said Harry. "I'm going to be sick."

"Here," said Sirius, thrusting the parchment into Harry's hand. "Hermione wrote you a speech."

Sirius pushed Harry up to the podium and stepped back. Harry looked at the crowd of people staring back. *You will not get sick.* Harry unfolded the parchment. He swallowed several times. The knot in his throat wouldn't go away.

“Friends,” said Harry. “I use the term friends because within the last few years we have been united as friends against a dark wizard who would vanquish our world as we know it.

“Many have suffered due to his cruelties, many have died. Many of us have lost hope many times. Some of us have lost faith in others. We became a broken society.

We succumbed to the worst. People turned against each other. Trust was forgotten. Even honor was forsaken.

“It took betrayal to re-unite our world. That betrayal,” Harry looked up at them, “my betrayal outraged the world so much that you re-united.

“Once you were together again, there was no stopping the strength of the wizards I see before me. I knew then that our society would survive and that our culture would endure. I knew I was only a pawn on a chessboard.

“I checked the King, knowing I had to die. But fate doesn’t play by our rules and I lived. Voldemort is dead, the threat to our world is gone.

“But the unification of our world is still present. I see it in all of your faces. The drive to rebuild is there.

“I am still that lone pawn on the chessboard, but I am here if you need me.

“I face you now as the boy who lived. I face you now as the boy who lived again. I face you now as the man who defeated him.”

That was the end of Hermione’s speech. Harry swallowed the lump in his throat again. He had to go on.

“Voldemort is dead. I should be too,” said Harry. “Fate has a strange way of revealing itself. My destiny is unclear again. But it will get here when it gets here. I guess I’ll be ready for it when it comes.

Thank you.”

Harry stepped away from the podium. Dead silence met his ears. He felt like he was going to be sick again.

He looked at Sirius and the crowd behind him erupted into applause and shouts. Harry still felt sick. Sirius came forward, wrapped an arm around Harry and turned him back toward the crowd. The crowd went nuts.

It wasn't at all like when he had won the Quidditch cup, or the House cup. Those were memories Harry recalled with ease and with great pride. This seemed like a pill he had to swallow.

They didn't understand that Harry should have died. They couldn't feel Harry's confusion because he was still alive. They didn't feel the fear Harry had that something went wrong in the Chamber of Secrets and that Voldemort would be back.

Harry recalled Hagrid's words. "It'll get here when it gets here."

But nothing happened. Harry had a special ceremony to receive his diploma (he had still been unconscious during the Hogwarts graduation). It was supposed to be private but so many people turned up it became a fiasco.

He took the summer off, spending time with Sirius and Remus. Well mostly Remus, because Sirius found himself a girlfriend and Harry refused to let Sirius ignore her. Harry still had Ron and Hermione, who were still dating.

Ginger was a problem. She wasn't speaking him again.

After her initial relief that he was all right, she staunchly maintained that Harry should have taken her with them to the compound. But Harry believed that he had done the right thing, as did Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

So he and Ginger were apart until one of them gave up their resolve. Harry would be damned if it would be him. Even Voldemort would have conceded to Harry's stubbornness. Harry was convinced that she would come around though.

So Harry spent a lot of time with Remus, who was always around because he insisted that he couldn't seriously consider anyone to date.

"No one deserves to have to deal with what I am, Harry," said Remus.

"But if—"

"No," insisted Remus. "I can't thrust that on anyone. I know *you* of all people know what it's like to realize how dangerous it is for people to care about you."

Harry had opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. "Stubborn," said Harry.

Remus stayed the summer though. He had his own room at La Cassa Black and Harry who had enlisted Hermione's aid, was focused on getting Remus a love interest.

Harry had to give up on that idea too, because Remus and Sirius figured out what he was doing.

Remus cornered Harry one day looking hurt. "Are you trying to get rid of me, Harry," he said.

Harry had stammered pathetically. "No. I-I'm s-sorry. I-I j-just – well—"

Remus laughed at him then he handed him a letter. "You got an owl from the Ministry," said Remus.

Harry opened it hesitantly. He looked with shock at the parchment.

"What is it?" said Remus.

"It's a formal invitation to join the Ministry," said Harry with disbelief. "Listing several positions to choose from."

"What's wrong with that," said Remus. "Why so surprised? You have to do something with your life now."

"I can't join the Ministry," said Harry.

“Why not?” said Remus. “Your father was in the Ministry and you’re the one who fixed it.”

Harry smirked at him. “Exactly,” said Harry. “Don’t you think it would seem – well arrogant,” was the only word Harry could think of, “if I joined after I told them how to reconstruct it.”

Remus ruffled his hair. “Modest,” said Remus.

*Modesty, a noble attribute.*

Harry still couldn’t get Voldemort out of his head. He guessed he’d have to live with it.

*You are as a part of me as I am a part of you.*

Harry sighed but they were both distracted as two owls flew in the window. One was Hedwig, which Harry guessed was a reply to the note he had sent to Hermione, the other was an ordinary barn owl Harry didn’t recognize.

Harry took the letter of the barn owl first.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*You are hereby invited to team try-outs for the Professional Quidditch teams. In your case, try-outs are strictly a formality as the administration has already heard of your talent on the Quidditch field.*

*Trial times and dates for all of the teams are listed below.*

*We look forward to watching you fly.*

*Nelson Peters*

*Administrator*

International Quidditch League

Harry looked up at Remus, his eyes wide with excitement.

“There you go, Harry,” said Remus. “Perfect for you. With your talent you’ll be more famous than Viktor Krum.”

Harry’s excitement deflated. Did he want more fame than he already had? Harry didn’t think he could bear it.

He pulled off Hermione’s note and opened it.

*Dear Harry,*

I don’t know what you’re worried about. I’m sure there are tons of stuff you could do. I think you should write a book. I’ll help you if you want. Who’s more qualified to write about what really happened all those years when you were fighting Voldemort than you? Lockhardt wrote all his books taking all the credit for himself. Just think how famous you’d be when everyone knows you really did all the things you claim.

Harry cringed and looked up at Remus.

“Just what I need,” muttered Harry. “More fame.”

Remus laughed. “Well, it’s just a thought,” said Remus. “You can always do that later. What else does she have to say?”

*Ron’s already decided to go into the Ministry. Harry had known that. But when your father is Minister, I guess you don’t have much choice. Although I heard they can’t get Charlie away from his dragons and Bill won’t leave Gringotts.*

*As for me, I’ve already been accepted to Gryffindore University. I’ve decide to teach Arithmancy. It was always my favorite subject.*

*There’s another option for you, Harry. Hogwarts always seems to need a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I think you’re qualified.*

*Write soon.*

*I’ll be visiting the Weasley’s at the end of the month so I’ll see you then.*

*Love from,*

Hermione.

Harry looked up at Remus again. "That's it," said Harry.

"What's it?" said Remus.

"I could teach," said Harry as if he was daft for not thinking of it before.

"You could," said Remus.

"What? Don't *you* think I'm qualified?" said Harry.

Remus smirked at him. "I know you are," said Remus. "But would you want to? It would be reliving the nightmare, Harry. Think about it."

Harry did think about it and the more he thought the more convinced he got.

Sirius' opinion ran with Remus' that it would be too painful.

"More painful than Voldemort touching my scar?" scoffed Harry.

"What about all the emotional manipulation he put you through, Harry?" argued Sirius. "Are you willing, ready, to open up your memories to a bunch of students who only know you as Harry Potter, the boy who lived and the man who killed Voldemort?"

"Look at it this way," said Harry. "I should have died that day. But I didn't. What path would destiny want me to live bad enough that it kept me alive? Not to go on to glory playing quidditch or more fame by writing a book. And I can't sit around all day living off the Gryffindor inheritance. I'm supposed to teach, pass on my experiences so if anything happens again, the world will be ready."

"Well, it's your decision, Harry," said Sirius. "If you think you can handle it, then I'm with you."

Harry smiled with excitement and gratitude. He hugged Sirius. "Thanks, Sirius," said Harry. "I know I'm right on this one. I'll be a



good teacher, you'll see. And I bet I last longer than a year at Hogwarts."

Harry raced up to his room to get started. He made a formal request to enter Gryffindor University and sent Hedwig with it then he held up his arm for Rowan.

Rowan looked deep into Harry's eyes. Her song told him that she agreed with him and Harry smiled at her. "I know, girl," said Harry. "Go and tell Ginger what I've decided." Rowan nestled under Harry's chin a moment then took off for Hogwarts.

School had started a week ago and Ginger had one more year. Harry had started using Rowan to send her messages because Ginger could understand Rowan also. Just as Harry was Rowan's wizard, he guessed Rowan considered Ginger her witch as well. Even if Ginger still wasn't speaking to Harry and never wrote back to him.

Harry leaned on his windowsill looking out over the yard. He could just make out the top of the Weasley's chimney over the trees. He'd go over and tell Ron and Mrs. Weasley later. Mrs. Weasley would be pleased.

It was then that Harry noticed the Eagle owl flying toward his window. He stepped aside to let the Malfoy's owl in and quickly took the note from it's leg. Draco's handwriting was easily recognized.

Harry hadn't seen or heard from him since the trials began. The telepathy was gone. Hermione speculated that since it was somehow linked to Voldemort, the ability (or gift as it were) simply died with him.

Opening the note, Harry read:

*Harry,*

*Well thanks to you and Dumbledore I've been cleared of all charges. I still can't believe my father got away. Our house is searched regularly and my mother has to account for every Knut we spend to insure it isn't going to him.*

*My father is no fool though so I doubt they'll find him. I can't help missing him, regardless of what he's done to me – and you – and I often hear my mother crying at night. I guess we have to move on now.*

*I saw your little speech. I was impressed although I can bet Granger wrote it for you. You ruined it by looking as if you were going to throw up through it, pathetic Gryffindor moron that you are.*

Harry laughed at that.

*I'm continuing my education at Slytherin University but I'm not sure what I'll pursue yet. Mum would like me to go into politics but I haven't decided. It seems weird that we are all faced with such mundane decisions now after everything we've been through. You especially.*

*I guess that's life.*

*Write when you can or if you need me. Try not to get yourself killed – although you're pretty good at that now.*

Draco

*PS: Leave it to you to wear your Hogwarts uniform to die in. The white shirt was ironically fitting though. With all the blood it was very dramatic – in a tragic sort of way.*

Harry couldn't help laughing again. He wrote a quick note, telling Draco what he had decided to do and attached it to the owl's leg. The owl bobbed its head once then flew out the window.

Smiling, Harry watched it until it was out of sight, his thoughts returning to Hogwarts.

He looked at his watch and couldn't help himself. *Commentary.*

*Mr. Padfoot knows Harry's determination and does indeed think he will make a fine teacher.*

*Mr. Moony agrees with Mr. Padfoot and would like to add that his year of teaching at Hogwarts was one of the best years of his life.*

Mr. Prongs thinks his son should've joined a Quidditch team but will probably find more fulfillment teaching.

Harry had to laugh. He guessed his father was as bad as himself when it came to Quidditch.

One more message flashed across the watch.

*Mr. Wormtail thinks with Master Harry's powers his options are many but he also knows that Harry Potter teaching about the Dark Lord would please the master very much.*

Harry had to laugh again. *That* was certainly true. Voldemort loved to gloat and he certainly would love it if Harry went on and on about all Voldemort's endeavors.

Harry sighed as he looked out the window again. A light breeze ruffled his untidy hair. He had a plan now.

He would learn how to teach and hopefully get a position at Hogwarts. He would marry Ginger (if she ever came around and stopped being so stubborn) and have lots of kids to play quidditch with. He'd build them a grand house near Sirius and the Weasley's (he got the impression that Mrs. Weasley would be annoyed if they lived too far away) and he'd have something he always wanted.

A life that wasn't a nightmare.

The End ??